西尾維新
NISIOISIN
The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User
UPROOTED RADICAL 3
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NOVELS

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Nekosogi Radical (Third)
The Blue Savant And The Nonsense User
Nisio Isin

Price: Physical 1080 Yen (Tax Included)

"As long as I'm alive, I cannot give up on seeing the end of the world, the end of the Story."
Thus spoke Humanity's Worst Player, the "fox-masked man" to "I," the Nonsense User.
Kunagisa bidding farewell. Magokoro rampaging. And, Aikawa reviving...
All the notes move to satisfy all the foreshadowing in the series, this is the ultimate crescendo!
And, and, and, and, and—
This is the finale of the three-part Uprooted Radical movement, putting a close on this must-read, state-of-the-art young adult entertainment Zaregoto Series!
Go ahead, Nisio Isin!!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

AKAGAMI IRIA	LADY
HANDA REI	HEAD MAID
CHIGA AKARI	TRIPLET MAID, ELDEST DAUGHTER
CHIGA HIKARI	TRIPLET MAID, MIDDLE DAUGHTER
CHIGA TERUKO	TRIPLET MAID, YOUNGEST DAUGHTER
IOUKI KANAMI	ARTIST
SASHIRONO YAYOI	COOK
HIMENA MAKI	FORTUNE-TELLER
SONOYAMA AKANE	SCHOLAR
SAKAKI SHINTA	ATTENDANT
ATEMIYA MUMI	STUDENT
USAMI AKIHARU	STUDENT
EMOTO TOMOE	STUDENT
ADII MIKOKO	STUDENT
SASA SASAKI	DETECTIVE
KARUGA KAZUHITO	DETECTIVE
SHISEI YUMA	ZIG ZAG
HASHARA SHIOGI	STRATEGIST
SAIJOU TAMAMO	INSATIBLE
ORIGAMI NOA	DIRECTOR
SHADOU KYOUICHIROU	RESEARCHER
OOGAKI SHITO	ASSISTANT
UZE MISACHI	SECRETARY
KOUTARI HINATOSHI	RESEARCHER
REO FURUARA	RESEARCHER
MIYOSHI KOKOROMI	RESEARCHER
KASUGAI KASUGA	RESEARCHER
UTSUROI SAMUKE	GREEN GREEN GREEN
HINEMOSU SUZU	DOUBLE FLICK
GOTOOOROKI SEIGO	REVERSE CROSS
MUNEFUYU MUTSUKI	CUBIC LOOP
NAOKIRI HAKURAKU	DANCING WITH MADNESS
AYAMINAMI IYOU	CHECCA
SHIKIGAMI KISHIKI	DAD KING
SHIGAI TOUKO	TRIGGER HAPPY-CHO
KIGAMINE YAKU	ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
MADOKA KUCHIHA	EXPERIMENTAL SUBJECT
NOUNOMIYA IZUMU	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NOUNOMIYA RIZUMU	GREAT DETECTIVE
ASANO MIKO	SWORDSMAN
YUKARIKO ICHIHIME	GIRL
YAMIGUCHI HOUKO	GIRL
ISHINAGI MOCTA	GRIM REAPER
HAYABUSA KOUTOUMARU	DJ
NANANANAMI NANAMI	WITCH
ISHIMARU KOUTA	GREAT THIEF
ZEROZAKI HITOSHIKI	DEMONIC KILLER
KAJOU AKIRA	SECOND
ICHIRIZUKA KONOMI	SPACE CREATOR
EMOTO SONOKI	DOCTOR
UTAGE KUDAN	AERIAL WEAPON
FURUTARI ZUKIN	SWORDSMITH
TOKINOMIYA JIKOKU	THOUGHT MANIPULATOR
MISHIMA RURERO	PUPPETEER
YAMIGUCHI NUREGINU	ASSASSIN
MIOTSUKUSHI MISORA	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
MIOTSUKUSHI TAKAMI	PROFESSIONAL KILLER
NOISE	DISSONANCE
KINO RAICHI	POISON USER
OMOKAGE MAGOKORO	ORANGE SEED
SAITOU TAKASHI	WORST
AKAWA AIR	RED
KUNAGISA TOMO	BLUE
I (NARRATOR)	PROTAGONIST

Nekosogi
Radical

ACT 17 - A LONG GOODBYE
UTAGE KUDAN
AERIAL WEAPON

0

Because I like, I hate.
Though I hate, I like.

1

The origin was revenge.
I think it was revenge.
I think it was atonement.
I think it was a grudge.
I think it was resentment.
I think it was venting out.
But all of that is wrong.
In the end, that's just theory.
I just wanted to do something.
If I didn't do anything, I felt like I would die.
Therefore.

Therefore, I met the blue boy.

The first time I saw her.
Kunagisa Tomo was a child playing in a sandbox.
Building a sand castle.
What was the purpose of that castle?
Why was she building it?
That, I do not know.
Anyway, Kunagisa was wholeheartedly—
Wholeheartedly gathering all her concentration.

Making all her concentration gather.

Building a castle.

Her castle.

Her castle was already near completion.

Without any real reason, I kicked that castle.

Destruction.

I destroyed it.

Of course, I didn't know Kunagisa Tomo at that point.

I didn't know who that blue boy was.

I didn't know the grounds for the blue hair before my eyes.

I only kicked the castle, because I didn't like it.

I didn't like the form of the castle.

I really had no reason.

Kunagisa didn't say anything.

She didn't even look at me.

She reacted as if the sand had collapsed because of a strong gust of wind.

Not just inside her field of vision,

Inside that blue boy too, I didn't exist.

She scooped sand and rebuilt the collapsed castle.

Astonishment.

What surprised me was the fact that Kunagisa returned every grain of sand that had collapsed, without fail, to its previous position, to its previous spot. That she restored the castle, in the strictest sense, back to an unchanged state.

For that action, just how much memory, how much cognitive ability, and how much precision was necessary —I didn't want to think about something that preposterous. Kunagisa wasn't recognizing the sand as a whole, but every grain individually, and at that time I

understood that she was probably also looking at the world in the same way, in atomic units.

And so, I yielded.

I yielded to the blue boy.

I was resolved to be exploited.

I was resolved, and I accepted it.

The moment I met her.

At that very moment, I lost to Kunagisa.

I...

At that time, in frustration and in a fit of anger,

Really, without any reason,

I kicked Kunagisa's blue hair.

"Kusanagi? Kuginasa? What?"

"Kunagisa, it's Kunagisa. K・U・N・A・G・I・S・A・Kunagisa. And then Tomo, for friend. Kunagisa Tomo."

"Hmm. I see. Kunagisa-kun, huh. Heeh, your head, it's pretty cool."

"You can call me Tomo."

"Alright. Then you can call me Tomo too."

"That's confusing. I'm choosing to call you Ii-chan."

"Then I shall call you Ii-chan too."

"That's confusing."

I learned that the blue boy was a girl.

I learned that the girl was a direct descendant of the Kunagisa bloodline.

The direct descendant of the Kunagisa Syndicate that had invited me,

And that my little sister was a sacrifice for her.

That I was exploited for the girl's sake.

I learned everything.

Without missing anything, I learned.

The only thing I didn't know until the end was why the

girl called me Ii-chan.

That was...a trivial detail.

There wasn't any special reason.

The origin—

The origin was revenge.

It was revenge.

It was atonement.

It was a grudge.

It was resentment.

It was venting, at least it should have been.

Before I knew it, we...

Slowly...leisurely.

Brazenly...impudently.

As if it was natural.

We spent time together.

We spent it together to the point of becoming sad.

A long time.

An eternity.

But in the blink of an eye.

A catastrophe immediately befell us.

I was trying—trying to save her.

I think I was trying to save Kunagisa Tomo.

But in the end, my actions were nothing more than revenge and atonement and a grudge and resentment and venting. But there's just one thing—if I had to judge one thing as true for the me of that time, it'd be that I certainly intended to save Kunagisa Tomo.

I didn't intend to break her.

I didn't intend to kill her.

Even if everything else was no good—

That alone.

That alone could be forgiven.

For the me of that time, when my existence was drenched in sin and corruption, even if that existence was unforgivable no matter what—even then, if I had to say, that alone is forgivable.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Same as before—she isn't a tiny bit off in her atomic vision.

The me of that time, for her sake—

Wouldn’t even hesitate to die.

Even then—but even then, why?

Why did I run?

And.

Why did I...

Change on my own?

Even though I wanted to be at her side.

Even though I swore to be at her side.

Even though I wanted to be with her forever.

Even though I should not have changed.

Even then...

"Yaah, Ii-chan. You were faster than I thought. No, I guess in this case, saying 'you were slower than I thought' might be more suitable?"

Kunagisa—

Kunagisa Tomo was on the roof of her building in Shirosaki—she was sitting lightly, in a really relaxed way, on top of the fence surrounding it on four sides.

If she threw off her balance even a little,

She would drop from the height of the building.

In that position.

In that stance.
With that balance—
That’s probably how we’d been living our lives.
Kunagisa and I had been doing that forever.
Right, that's why.
It was never weird.
As Kunagisa said—
This scene, it was too late.
It was probably earlier than expected.
But it was later than it should have been.
It had gone too, too well.
We had gone like this for too long.
We had lived too long.
"St—"
I tried to call out to Kunagisa—
Tried to call out normally.
But even then, my words got stuck.
I failed to call her.
Kunagisa turned only her head towards me and looked at me with a faint smile.
"Come this way."
She said.
"Next to Boku-sama-chan is Ii-chan's seat."
"...Right."
That was right.
For some reason, I was able to agree.
I approached Kunagisa one step at a time,
Easily scaled up the fence,
And sat next to her.
"It's high."
"One hundred and forty meters. Higher than Tokyo Tower."

"Is it fine?"

"What is?"

"Being somewhere this high."

"I'm fine with high places."

"But—"

Kunagisa Tomo was living with three mental disorders. The first one was being unable to execute any harsh vertical movement on her own. Though it was different for her territory, within the familiar landscape of her house, this castle shouldn't have counted as inside Kunagisa's domain. There was no way Kunagisa could endure such vertical movement—no, if it was just her climbing on the roof, she could have had Utage Kudan from earlier, Shigai Touno, accompany her, but even then, I doubt that Touno-san would have allowed her in a place like this. According to Touno-san, it wasn't certain that she could meet me—

"Aah. **Those kinds of things** are fine now."

Kunagisa said nonchalantly.

"In the first place, they were like shackles that I put on myself to have someone near me."

"Shackles..."

"Chains, maybe? And the two others, well, it's a similar story. Like building a character in retrospective. That being said, even then, the only one that stayed next to me until the end was Ii-chan, though."

"That's not...really the case. I'm just a replaceable, common—"

"That wasn't really the case. That was not the case at all. Come on, Ii-chan's replacement? Since you came here, that means you met Nacchan, right? Shigai Touno, *Trigger Happy-End (Corpse)*."

"...Yeah." I nodded. "That person, which one is her real name? No, rather than her real name... Which is her true identity? Shigai Touno or Utage Kudan. Shigai Touno of *Team*, or Utage Kudan of the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"True identity? Kinda sounds weird. Ahaha, right, Ii-chan had trouble with people with many names. Since way back. No, it's not like one of them is the real one. Since Nacchan is all alone. If I had to say, right, Boku-sama-chan was the one to meet her first."

"And—after that, Mr. Fox."

"Right, *Mr. Fox*."

Kunagisa said.

"I will exclude the details, but when Boku-sama-chan was acting as a part of *Team*, kinda, it was like 'whack!', we fought against someone—it seems that was the one Ii-chan calls *Mr. Fox*. And at that time, Nacchan became a subordonate of his."

"So she was a traitor?"

"Rather than a traitor, a coward I guess. I will still exclude the details, but essentially, I had Nacchan act as a spy. Even after *Team* stopped functioning, Nacchan continued to act as a spy for some reason."

"For some reason..."

"No, since *Team* was no more, that action was not even spying... Well Boku-sama-chan didn't know until recently either, though. Kinda like 'Eh, is Nacchan still doing that?'"

"...That means, do you grasp the situation I'm in—did Touno-san tell you the main gist?"

"Nuh-uh. I didn't really ask and Nacchan didn't tell me anything either. I think it's clear if you look at Sacchan, but we don't all get along that well. But that said, Nacchan

told me everything just earlier. I swear, speaking to no end when no one asked. She also tattled some unnecessary things to Ii-chan. I really feel like I got betrayed by Nacchan. Unmistakably. A coward being a traitor, huh?"

"..."

"That fox is bad. Right, that fox."

Uni, Kunagisa turned her neck.

Even though we were this high, there was no wind.

You could even call it windless.

That's scary.

Inversely scary.

The fox-masked man—Saitou Takashi.

Not only Aikawa-san and Magokoro—

That man also had a connection with Kunagisa Tomo.

I remember the time that the fox-masked man ambushed me in the underground parking lot. And even before that, originally—the first time I met that man was precisely **here**, wasn't it?

Kunagisa Tomo, *Dead Blue (The Verge of Death)*.

That's probably what the fox-masked man called *trial and error*, a passing point to reach the end of the world, the end of the Story. Of course, it wasn't a connection as firm as Aikawa-san's or Magokoro's...for the fox-masked man, it was already over. It would be the same whether it happened or not—but even then, now that it had come to it, it made me realize it even stronger.

The connection between Saitou Takashi and I.

Enemy.

Enemy—enemy, enemy, enemy.

As if...it was predestined.

As if there was no salvation.

No matter how much I struggled, would it have all been

the same in the end?

"..."

...Nonsense.

That kind of thing—I'd thought about it many times.

I'd known it was true since Magokoro was introduced.

But, even then.

To be honest, I was ashamed of that thought.

Just Kunagisa.

Just Kunagisa—she was the one I didn't want to participate.

Kunagisa was the one I wanted to involve the least.

Even then—Kunagisa.

I wonder if, even then—if she would still tell me messed up things like being happy to get involved.

I wonder if she could still say such things.

At this time, to me.

To me.

"Well, originally, be it Nacchan, Sacchan or the rest, they were all people that I searched and looked for with the goal of being Ii-chan's successors. Every one of them had a screw loose somewhere, but even then, in the end, even if they were to all join their forces, they still couldn't rival Ii-chan. But that being said, even if they were failures, it doesn't change the fact that *Team* was Ii-chan's replacement. If you say that Ii-chan and *Mr. Fox* were absolutely destined to be enemies, then our *Team* affronting *Desert Fox* would be, well, natural or obvious I guess."

"My...replacement?"

"Even if I use the word 'replacement', they really ended up as failures. I told you, didn't I? Come on, Ii-chan's replacement? Now, thanks to all the rumors,

they're described as some kind of terrorist legend, but in the end, they were a weakling army that couldn't even destroy a single world. Even though with Ii-chan, if we were to continue like before, far from the world, we could have even shattered the universe—we couldn't kill a fox, not even a lynx. In the end, Ii-chan's replacement—it was a role that couldn't be filled by anyone. Be it Nacchan, be it Sacchan, be it anyone else."

"That's not...really the case. Something like my replacement...although you phrase it like that, according to that Utsurigi jerk, it's something that can be achieved very easily. Now I finally feel like I understood why Utsurigi was so persistent on my case, but—"

"Aah, I see. Is that so, so that's what that was. But that was just jealousy. How tiny, unbefitting of Sacchan. According to me, it's clear; no one can be Ii-chan's replacement."

Kunagisa said faintly.

As if singing pi's decimals, faintly.

"There are two reasons. Want to know?"

"..."

"The first one, this is really simple. First, they would need to be loved by Boku-sama-chan, right? That is impossible for anyone but Ii-chan. I like everybody, but—I only love Ii-chan."

Kunagisa seemed to smile a little.

I couldn't bear to look into her eyes.

I couldn't bear to look—to look at that smile.

I couldn't look.

"And the second one—as a reason, this one is much more conclusive. If someone wants to stand next to Boku-sama-chan, in the place where Ii-chan stood, they would

need to hate me from the bottom of their heart." Kunagisa said. "That, Sacchan or Nacchan—they could absolutely never do it."

"I—"

My chest hurt.

There was no wind.

I briefly looked down at the ground.

It was too...small.

The world looked small.

Tiny.

"I like you."

"Like."

"Yeah, like."

"How much do you like Boku-sama-chan?"

"To the point I could die."

"Then, how much do you hate me?"

That's...as if.

As if those questions could just be casually stringed together.

"How much does Ii-chan hate Kunagisa Tomo? How much does Ii-chan hate the Boku-sama-chan, who turned your life into the worst? How much does Ii-chan hate the Boku-sama-chan, who turned your sister into a mere pile of strained lees? How much do you hate the Boku-sama-chan who stalled Ii-chan when he was a boy drenched in sin and corruption, a boy who would have definitely led a better life if we hadn't met?"

"...Tomo—"

"Do you hate me to the point you could die?"

"—I."

"Well, you should hate me to the point you could kill me or to the point you could break me, thinking

normally."

...You.

You actually hate Kunagisa Tomo, don't you?

Utsurigi Gaisuke's...Nonsense Killing.

However, because that man always talked in a clever way and addressed me as skillfully as if he was my reflection in a mirror, though I couldn't believe that at first glance—

Since nonsense is a means to hide truth.

Truth is therefore a means to kill nonsense.

"Even then—"

Now, for the first time.

Kunagisa's words were filled with something akin to emotion.

"Ii-chan won't—hate **me** or abandon **me**[1]—right?"

That—that emotion.

You could probably call it anger.

It was called indignation.

"Why?"

"Even if...you ask that."

I couldn't answer.

There was no way I could answer something like that.

...No, that's false.

It's not that I couldn't answer, I already did.

Because I—I like you.

Because I like you.

I like you, so I can't detest you.

I like you, so I can't go against you.

It's just that.

It's just something that easy to understand.

Since that day.

Ever since that day when we first met, but...

Kunagisa was probably not satisfied with that answer.

This was not the answer Kunagisa requested.

Kunagisa didn't request—

Something this vague and unclear.

At Shadou Kyouichirou's research facilities—at that time, the smile appearing on Kunagisa's face when looking at that corpse drenched in blood.

Since that day, it began.

No,

In reality, it had already begun since the day we met.

Isn't it obvious?

"Hey, answer. Why? Why doesn't Ii-chan hate Boku-sama-chan? Even though, if you hated Boku-sama-chan, this would be really, really easy."

"Mo-more importantly than that."

I—

I didn't want to use nonsense against Kunagisa there.

Even now, I was still bad at giving up.

That's why I changed the topic.

Changed.

But, this was already a dead end.

The destinations it could change to were limited.

Everywhere I could change it to—they were all dead ends.

"Tomo. You—you will die soon, I heard."

"..."

"I heard that you could die any second now. Touno-san said so. Is that the truth?"

"Yes, it's true."

Kunagisa agreed normally.

Not putting a bold front, but not messing around either.

Very normally.

As if she had known for a long time.

"Really...Nacchan is a big gossiper, what a problem. Even though her lips being shut to the point of cowardice was my favorite part of her, even though it was the part that resembled Ii-chan the most. Really, she did something unnecessary. In the end, a replacement is a replacement, an imitation is an imitation; it cannot become the real thing. A complete alternative doesn't exist, it can't exist. I will say it again and again, but Ii-chan really is irreplaceable."

"I don't care about that—no one cares about me. Don't talk about me. So, what was it? Why didn't you tell me? You—intended to die without telling me? If Touno hadn't told me—would I have not known anything until **everything** was over?"

Like six years ago.

Outside the loop, until **everything** was over.

In the center of the world and outside the loop.

Ignorance by subjective symptoms.

Knowing your height, but not your place.

That kind of idea—

Would it apply again?

Of course, I already knew that.

I already understood that.

That Kunagisa would die someday.

That she was an ephemeral girl to begin with.

That her just living in the moment was a miracle.

"Didn't you already know?"

Kunagisa, as if seeing right through me,

Was probably smiling.

As if looking at a corpse.

"At the very least, Ii-chan should have known. For Boku-sama-chan, from the start, it was unnatural to be alive. Like forcing something wrong to live. Like making an immortal girl who lived for centuries continue to live forever, an existence that shouldn't exist—didn't you already know that? These blue hairs are proof of recessiveness."

That's right, I knew it.

What dying was.

What living was.

If you live to die, then—

How unnatural being alive is.

When your existence is like that—

Just living feels like dying.

Of course, he never said it in front of his beloved little sister, he could not bring himself to, but casually, when we found ourselves alone, her brother, Kunagisa Nao, without any deep emotion, with real wonder, tilted his head and said to himself.

'Why does my sister—not die?'

That was probably a statement enveloped in its shell.

Because it was the weak and strong Nao-san who never said his true thoughts even to himself, by restraining his unconscious, he could say it in a roundabout way.

In reality, what he thought was,

Why does my little sister keep living?

In reality, that was common—

Not especially cruel, a common opinion.

Anytime, at any age—just looking at Kunagisa's clinical records, which were thirty billion times thicker than those of a normal person, anyone would lose their words at that abnormality.

And so I thought.

Why was she alive?

So, it wasn't anything unnatural at all.

Just dying.

She was just dying.

Kunagisa Tomo—she was just dying.

As natural as the fact that the world will die out one day.

Like the fact that the world will end someday.

Like the fact that the Story will end someday.

Even though it's just one girl dying—

Even then, why was it so...

Even though I ran away.

Even though...I once ran away from that fact.

Kunagisa Tomo dies.

She can be broken.

I can break her.

I can kill her—despite having run away from that fact.

Although she was already a girl easily able to die,

Even though I made it easier for her to die...

"I will say something unnecessary, but—it's not Ii-chan's fault. This is something—something that was decided from way back. At the very least, Boku-sama-chan knew it from the start. Look, I think it was in August, I told you, didn't I? That it looks like it will soon be dangerous. I properly put out some foreshadowing, because if I suddenly died, Ii-chan would be surprised."

"But—"

I wouldn't just be surprised.

I mean, after that.

You said it, didn't you?

That you would be fine now.

That, from now on, everything would be fine.

"Aah...that. Yes, that, that, I failed a little, what a blunder Boku-sama-chan did. How embarrassing, how embarrassing. Thinking about it now, it was really unnecessary. I gave Ii-chan unnecessary hope—also..."

Kunagisa said.

"I made you see a dream you didn't want to."

"..."

"At first, you know, I intended to withdraw it immediately. It's a lie, in reality I will die very soon—I wanted to tell you lightly. But you see—

"Ii-chan was delighted."

Kunagisa seemed sad.

She may be crying, I thought.

However, she probably wasn't.

Kunagisa Tomo could not cry.

Like how I could not smile.

Even if tears flowed, in reality, she wouldn't be crying.

"I didn't think Ii-chan would be delighted."

"..."

"I intended it to be my last mean-spirited joke—I thought that, if Boku-sama-chan stayed forever at Ii-chan's side, Ii-chan would hate it."

"That I...would hate it."

"I thought it was a lie. Though I'm sorry." Kunagisa said. "Although Ii-chan says a lot of things through his words and attitude, I thought that Ii-chan had to hate me from the bottom of his heart. Although Boku-sama-chan believed Ii-chan, I just believed you, be it truths or lies. I didn't think it was true."

"...Tomo."

"Even if Ii-chan says that he likes Boku-sama-chan, I could believe it, but I couldn't think it was the truth."

"You really...have no faith in me. I feel like the boy who cried wolf."

"The boy who cried wolf lied about there being wolves, didn't he? Ii-chan lied about there not being wolves. That difference, although it looks trivial, is decisive."

"But...I..."

"Yes. That was a real reaction, Boku-sama-chan was surprised. Setting like and hate aside, it was very surprising for Ii-chan to be glad. Setting like and hate aside, at the very least, Ii-chan thought it was fine for Boku-sama-chan to be at his side."

"Isn't that obvious?"

As expected—some irritation started to mix in my words.

I was frustrated that she thought such things.

No, it's not like I couldn't understand.

Being trusted or—being forgiven.

Unconditional trust and unconditional forgiveness.

It was a fact that I couldn't bear this and that Kunagisa did. In the end, these kinds of emotions reflected straight back to me—and naturally, it became a vicious circle.

What was obvious?

Even if my words reached Kunagisa—

My feelings didn't reach her.

That kind of thing, for Kunagisa—

Whether they reached her or not, it was the same.

Thinking about it, I was awfully laughable.

The truth coming from the bottom of my heart,

And the fiction that came out from my tongue,

Were heard as one and the same.

When you reach those extremities, the things you trust and the things you doubt—don't they become equal and interchangeable?

That's why—why I don't like it.

Being trusted.

Being forgiven.

I don't like it.

"The proposal made me glad. Even if it was a lie, even if it was the truth. Honestly, it wasn't that realistic—I mean, I don't think Ii-chan can conduct himself in the Kunagisa Syndicate at this point—but, even then, pleasant things make me glad. To the point I could die."

"...Nothing can be done about it?"

I said.

I said, trying to struggle.

"Can't something be done to lengthen your life? Mobilizing all of the Kunagisa Syndicate's power, wouldn't it be possible? If it's outside of your field, I can deceive the *Killing Names* or the *Cursing Names* and bring them here. Also, even without having someone save you, with your knowledge, couldn't you think of a way to avoid death?"

"Mmm."

I knew that I was asking for the impossible. If there was such a way, she would have done it long ago. Am I a kid, I thought. Am I just a hopeless, intolerant, unreasonable kid that strays his eyes away from the truth?

Not knowing the consequences.

Not knowing the limits.

But that was the same for Kunagisa too.

Then...

"Well, kinda."

Kunagisa said unusually evasively.

"How should I say it—I don't know what Nacchan told you, but because my body is now able to construct itself, it is not incorrect to say that 'I can die at any second' on a whole other level than before. But even then, from what Boku-sama-chan can calculate, for two or three years—I could continue living I guess."

"Can you?!"

"..."

To my enthusiasm, Kunagisa answered with silence.

That reminded me.

Not being able to look Kunagisa in the eyes.

I hadn't been able to face her for a while.

While being next to each other—

Because we were next to each other.

We couldn't face each other.

We couldn't face each other, being adjacent.

The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User.

"It means it's not zero, Ii-chan." Kunagisa cut the silence after about ten seconds and said. "Listen well, Ii-chan."

"What is it?"

"Zero point..."

Kunagisa

Took plenty of time to prepare her words,

"Zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero, three. The rest abridged."

She said.

"..."

"Not percent. Rate."

The decimal—it was wrong?

Here, again?

"Of course, it comes with its own price. Being this close to the end, I definitely wouldn't be able to escape unhurt. My unbalanced talent would probably become even more unbalanced, yes, to the extent where it would no longer be that much of a talent. My intellect would fall to the point of being rightfully called dim-witted. The restraints—the shackles and chains that I wore until now would be far from enough, and I would only be able to drag Ii-chan down. First, I would probably lose most of my sight, and my hair would also become dark. Less than a commoner."

"..."

"Even paying that much of a price, the probability remains just that. It's a strict calculation without favoritism, but now I think I should have been softer with the calculation."

Then, Kunagisa said "Yes.", as if confirming her own words.

She then continued once more.

"...But you know. Ii-chan, well, it's only a supposition but—Boku-sama-chan could probably clear a probability of that level. I don't know if Boku-sama-chan were alone, but if Ii-chan were at my side, I could."

"..."

"Because Ii-chan has really bad luck."

"...Then."

"But, if Ii-chan wants me to live, that's now impossible. I can only die." Kunagisa said. "It was a bet—Nacchan went somewhere, probably to Ii-chan's place, but I didn't stop her, thinking that Ii-chan may not come here. If that proposal and you being that glad were just one of Ii-chan's lies, Boku-sama-chan may have been able to survive, I thought."

Kunagisa looked toward me.

Not in a resentful way.

But,

That sight blamed me.

That alone.

As if saying that that alone was my fault.

"If—"

Kunagisa continued.

Not changing her tone.

Depending on how you listened, she might have seemed listless.

"If Ii-chan really, from the bottom of his heart, no, not even the bottom, it can be the sides or the top, of course even the middle—if Ii-chan could hate Boku-sama-chan even a little, if even an ounce of falsehood was mixed into that proposal, well, though it was not realistic, we may have been able to marry."

"..."

"Though we probably couldn't have had kids."

Who...could have foreseen it?

Who in the world could have foreseen it?

That the Nonsense User boy—

That he really liked the blue girl.

Without any distortion.

Simply.

Straightforwardly, to the point he could smile.

Wholeheartedly, to the point he could become sad.

I really liked...Kunagisa Tomo.

To the point I couldn't bring myself to hate her.

To the point of not being able to hate her.

To an unimaginable point.

I really liked her.

Ever since six years ago.

Without any interruption until today.

Without any change until today.

At first, it was revenge.

At first...it was revenge, but...

Until the end, it was revenge, but...

From the beginning to the end, I liked her.

Even if everything else was a lie, that alone was the truth.

Even if everything was a lie, that alone was the truth.

Even if that was a lie, it was true.

There were no wolves.

There were no wolves anywhere.

I continued to say that.

I continued to scream that.

Until my voice became hoarse and my throat was crushed.

Then this was it—the natural result.

It was all undeniable, pre-established harmony.

Destiny and—the Story.

An obvious conclusion.

"As if...as if your life and death would be determined by my luck. Not just for you—for anything and everything, stop making me the reason, stop making me the grounds. It's heavy. It's too heavy. Your trust and your forgiveness—they are too heavy for me to bear."

"Hahah."

Kunagisa laughed out loud.

"It's kinda weird. Thinking about it, this is the first time we've ever talked seriously like this."

"..."

"I feel like we always talked about meaningless and worthless things. Without any content, the kinds of trivial things that will all be forgotten seconds later, those kinds of chats. Although we've known each for such a long time."

"Was it...long?"

I had thought that.

But—

I didn't think that any longer.

"Well, the blank periods were too long, and also, Boku-sama-chan is a hikikomori, so we haven't actually interacted that much."

"But—"

I said.

"Inside me, your existence is too big."

"...Hmm."

"To the point I could throw everything else away."

Those were my true thoughts.

At this point, that was what I truly thought.

Without any deception, without any nonsense, my true thoughts.

It was true that, during the past six years, I had made myself a lot of other things that I wanted to protect, but that didn't change the fact that you are at the top.

That much could not change.

There could be no permutation.

For Kunagisa, I could throw everything away.

If Kunagisa wished for it,

I would kill anyone.

Even Miiko-san, even Aikawa-san.

Even Houko-chan, even Emoto-san.

I would kill anyone.
If Kunagisa wished for it, I would kill them.
I would abandon anything.
Like—like that demonic killer.
In small pieces.
Without leaving a fragment, in pieces.
I would kill anyone.
I could kill anyone.
I could kill the people I love without any hesitation.
And I find—
I find myself proud of it.
I have no embarrassment nor guilt.
I think that.
For me, Kunagisa was—everything.
Kunagisa Tomo was perfect.
I know...that.
"Being perfect wasn't good."
Kunagisa said.
Again, as if reading my heart.
"Being perfect is insipid."
"..."
"That's why Boku-sama-chan needed flaws. I needed caution. I needed shackles. I needed—chains." Kunagisa said. "Absolutely, critically. And more than anything, I needed a scabbard."
"...Scabbard...me?"
"In reality, I wanted to bring that to the coffin with me—but well, for the occasion, to save Nacchan's face, I could tell you just in case. At the very least, Boku-sama-chan was not essential for Ii-chan, but Ii-chan was essential for Boku-sama-chan."
"Why—"

Of course I knew.

Kunagisa couldn't live alone.

Because of that unbalanced talent, there were too many flaws and too many lacking parts—her existence was not compatible with everyday life. She needed someone like me or *Team*'s Utsurigi or Touno-san at her side to support her small body.

But,

If it was as she had said earlier.

If those flaws were shackles and chains that she put on herself—the story was completely different. Even if one cannot pretend to have physical abnormalities, for psychological ones—

"Liar."

Kunagisa said.

"If we're talking about liars, Boku-sama-chan is probably much more fit to bear that title than Ii-chan."

"...What do you mean?"

"Ufufu. I can't use nonsense like Ii-chan. Boku-sama-chan can only use straightforward words, so being a Nonsense User is only for Ii-chan, but in terms of being a liar, Boku-sama-chan is one or two levels above. I mean —"

Kunagisa's body lightly swayed.

She moved her weight to the front.

I thought she would fall at this rate.

However,

Her hands were firmly gripping the fence.

Not falling.

Not falling—yet.

We were still in the middle of the talk.

"Ii-chan cannot fool himself, but Boku-sama-chan

can even fool herself."

Boku-sama-chan lies to herself.

Kunagisa said that.

"As a liar, isn't that high-end?"

"...Yeah. It's like a secret final technique."

Lying to yourself unconsciously—

Everyone does that.

Like I have been doing usually.

However—intentionally.

If you can lie to your mind consciously.

That is closer to hypnosis rather than lies.

For example,

If there was someone who could, as if manipulating chopsticks in their right hand,

Manage their own mind and memory—

If someone were able to do it.

That would be the final form of a liar.

That kind of thing—

It would be impossible for anyone except Kunagisa, who possessed enormous memory and concentration and cognition ability.

For that Kunagisa—

Why in the world—

Why would something like that be necessary?

Willfully coiling yourself with chains.

Gladly coiling yourself with chains.

"I needed a weakness."

Kunagisa said.

"I needed frailness. I needed feebleness. I needed flaws. I needed defects."

I wanted frailness.

I wanted feebleness.

I wanted flaws.

I wanted defects.

I wanted...weakness.

"Long ago, Boku-sama-chan was wrong."

"Long ago—how long ago was it?"

"When I was just born."

Kunagisa said without any particular nostalgia.

As if talking from a memory that she couldn't recall.

"I was quite clever. I understood immediately. That this—this was not the world Boku-sama-chan should have been born in."

"Aah, I screwed up."

"—You say it like you took the wrong path."

"Yes. It's like I confused the right and left at the first corner. Well, left and right switch depending on the way you are facing, so either one may have been fine, but I screwed up. I failed. Ii-chan often said that his life was a succession of errors and failures, but even then. Even if that were true, Ii-chan being born in this world in itself was not an error."

"That's not the case."

"That's totally the case. And it is not...for Boku-sama-chan. The very first thing was wrong. Therefore, in Boku-sama-chan's case, my life was just trying to make up for that screw up. The last nineteen years, no, now it's nearly twenty, huh? If I make it there."

"I understand...that you are not compatible with this world. It's obvious that you exceed enough for that—"

"Incompatible. But thinking about it, those words seem like lies. More straightforwardly, I should say the other side of the world maybe."

"...Isn't it inevitable?"

I said nonchalantly.

The Kunagisa House.

Thinking about the character of the Kunagisa Syndicate, it was inevitable.

Ichigai, Nishiori, Sanzaka, Shikabane, Gotoride, Rokugase, skipping the seventh name, Hachikiri, and the Kunagisa Syndicate consolidating them.

Outside and guidebook, evergreen and corpse, fortress and shackles, and the limit towards the shore[2].

Those are, in other words, cursing words.

That is the reason why the seventh is missing.

Kunagisa Tomo—she was purebred.

Chaste, and purebred.

In that sense, you could say everyone and everything around the Kunagisa Syndicate was for Kunagisa Tomo's sake.

Her blue hair was the proof of recessiveness.

Those blue hairs were forever sought after.

Aah, I see.

Therefore, chains.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Omokage Magokoro.

And including Aikawa Jun, their genesis is the same.

The root was exactly the same.

Just, unlike Aikawa-san and Magokoro who were created intentionally and self-righteously by just one man, Kunagisa—she was an existence produced without anyone's intent, by pure coincidence, in an error of probabilities—an existence by no means inferior to the long, long, eternal history.

Monster.

Apparition.

Foreign body.

Birthed by history—

Birthed by the world, a hidden side of the world.

A self-paradox.

But, being perfect.

Being called perfect in this world.

"Perfection is wrong."

Kunagisa said quietly.

"That's why Boku-sama-chan was yearning for someone else. If I didn't, I wouldn't have been able to live. This personality—"

This personality, too, is artificial.

This personality, too, is an imitation.

"This is the most suitable personality for living, which I designed myself. The sample was Ii-chan's little sister, wasn't it? But, well, Ii-chan's sister and the other kids' personalities weren't stabilized yet at that point. Just kidding, Boku-sama-chan! Or something."

When was it again?

I compared Hime-chan to Kunagisa.

By saving Hime-chan just as much as I couldn't save Kunagisa six years ago, I once tried to compensate for it.

Because Kunagisa resembled Hime-chan.

But naturally, Hime-chan didn't know Kunagisa.

They had never met.

So in the end, that—that was the personality I couldn't leave alone the most. The personality Hime-chan had was, to put it bluntly, just an act—that wasn't Hime-chan herself.

That was just how Hime-chan dealt with the world.

However,

Kunagisa Tomo as well,
Wasn't her Original, in a pure sense.
Her, who wasn't a person—
Needed a personality as a humanoid.
My little sister was a part of that.
That kind of thing—
That kind of thing, I knew it.
I already knew it six years ago.
It was a common story.
Because it was a common story.
But, what was cruel in Kunagisa Tomo's case—
Was that it wasn't how she dealt with the world, not an act.
Being natural.
Being someone else.
Having nothing else.
Because—

She was empty.

She was empty, so she needed a husk.
It was just that.
She needed an install.
She needed a reboot—after the install.
"So. A husk, and chains."
Kunagisa said little by little, grumbling.
"Boku-sama-chan was always, from the start, yearning for Ii-chan. For an irreplaceable Ii-chan. To the point that anything else, even the world, was unnecessary."
"Well...I'm like a lump of flaws after all. Perfect for the flawless you. For you, whose flaw is to have no flaws—"
Baby bird.

Those were Nao-san's words.

But Kunagisa was too much—

To just be a baby bird.

"Ii-chan. Do you like Boku-sama-chan?"

"...As I said, I like you."

"Boku-sama-chan, you see."

Kunagisa said.

"I like Ii-chan."

"..."

"From the very start, Ii-chan was my ideal."

I was searching for **someone like Ii-chan**.

There was none—no replacement.

I wanted someone.

Someone with whom I could turn the whole world against me—

I yearned for it.

I wanted a friend.

"...Then weren't you disappointed? That the one you ended up meeting was like that."

"Nuh-uh. You were better than I imagined."

"More full of flaws than you imagined?"

"Yes."

"Don't agree with me there."

"Ra. Ther." Kunagisa chose her words for a bit. "There wasn't anyone but Ii-chan. **Humans** who reached Boku-sama-chan, who broke the guard of the Kunagisa Syndicate and reached Boku-sama-chan, there was no one except Ii-chan. Even *Green Green Green*, Utsurigi Gaisuke—even that professional of destruction and destruction and destruction, I was the one to call out to him."

"It's...by chance."

Right, by chance.

The fact that I reached the Kunagisa Syndicate's center —if you want to express it as something other than chance, it couldn't be anything else than an inevitability, an unavoidable inevitability.

It was just self-abandonment.

It was just complete desperation.

I crossed many and many dangerous bridges.

I didn't even think about testing the waters before crossing.

If that was the only means to contact the Kunagisa Syndicate—it's the same thing as there being no means.

Also...

In the end, I relied on Nao-san.

That place.

Nao-san was the one to guide me to that sandbox.

My meeting with Kunagisa—

The meeting between the despicable boy and the blue girl,

Was staged by the girl's brother.

I wonder,

With what feelings did Nao-san...

Have me meet Kunagisa.

His beloved little sister—

And me, who lost my little sister.

"Boku-sama-chan only had Ii-chan."

"That's why I absolutely didn't want to let Ii-chan go."

"..."

"That's why I cursed Ii-chan."

Kunagisa said that line really quietly.

"I bound you with curses."

Curses—

A cursing chain.

"Because Ii-chan is a good person."

"A good person?"

"In reality, a good person. In reality, a kind person. If I had to put it into words, it would be really cliché, but yeah, well, that's exactly it, that phrase. In reality, a kind man, the Nonsense User, Ii-chan."

"Why...does everyone say things like that? To this warped and useless me."

"It's simple. Because you really are a kind and good person. Because you are a really kind and good person."

"How much better would this all have been, if that was the case."

"I mean, if that wasn't the case—you wouldn't have been able to stay that long with Boku-sama-chan."

From the sandbox, to the roof.

"As I said before, I am a little mad that you ran away midway through, but even then, Ii-chan came back. Even if it wasn't for Boku-sama-chan's sake, you came back, didn't you?"

"In reality, I wanted to stay with you from the crib to the cemetery. I screwed up. But that being said, with this conclusion, it's roughly the same."

The sandbox being the crib and the roof being the cemetery.

I guess that was typical of Kunagisa Tomo.

Not knowing what she was thinking about, a husk.

Having thought about everything, an empty body.

And—

Looking up, the vast sky.

How much did we talk?

The eastern side faintly started to become white.

That light couldn't be blocked by anyone.

Nowhere.

High.

This was surely—surely the highest place.

Like a gravestone.

"I needed Ii-chan no matter what. Ii-chan was the only thing I couldn't hand over to anyone. I couldn't hand you to Nao-kun nor to Micchan. And naturally, not to the world either."

To something like the world.

I couldn't give up Ii-chan.

That's—

The feelings of a young and pure genius.

Her only request.

She didn't wish for anything else.

Her only prayer.

Her feelings and requests and wishes and prayers—

Only accumulated to that.

A dream.

That was a dream.

The blue girl who was born in the wrong world—the blue girl who was like an error in the Story, the blue girl who found even living difficult, the one called a Savant was earnestly dreaming of that reality.

Therefore,

Therefore, it didn't come true one bit.

How laughable.

As if, in front of me, that kind of hope would come true.

There was no way it would.

Even though...I shouldn't have done that.

If only—if only I didn't exist.

If I didn't exist, Kunagisa would have been somewhat happy, spending her life inside the Kunagisa Syndicate's walls, in the husk she created herself.

Even though she could have been reasonably happy.

I...but...

Even then, I wanted to save her.

That...wasn't a lie.

And Kunagisa too—she didn't want something so moderate.

In the end, she had the temperament of a genius.

From way back, and probably even now.

She wasn't searching for anything other than the absolute.

So.

The mechanical girl ended.

The girl about to break—she broke.

I was the one to both end her and break her.

No matter what anyone said.

Even if Kunagisa forgave me, I couldn't forgive myself.

"It's Boku-sama-chan's fault that Boku-sama-chan broke."

However—

Kunagisa said that.

"There was some absurdity in the settings. Boku-sama-chan was wrong for trying to put an unpredictable factor like Ii-chan under my control. So I assertively tried to force Ii-chan to take the lead, but it turns out a Nonsense User is only one because he cannot handle the grasp of leadership.. Ah, err, it was Micchan, wasn't he? The first one to call Ii-chan a Nonsense User.

"Mm...in this case, he 'read it', I guess."

"Either way of saying it is fine."

"Yes. Either way, it is splendid. Micchan, who gave the symbol of the Nonsense User to a natural-born Nonsense User, did a splendid job. A nickname worth a thousand gold coins. Errr, was it onomastic again?"

"Your...*Blue Savant* was delivered by that person too, huh."

"Yeah, that was good. But he went a little too far with the *Dead Blue* after that. It was well received amongst my comrades, but, umm, but well, even those comrades had titles such as *Green Green Green* or *Trigger Happy-End*."

"Apart from that...err, what was there again? I feel like I've heard them before. *Double Flick*, *Reverse Cross*, *Cubic Loop*, *Dancing With Madness*, *Cheetah* and *Bad Kind*, was it? I forgot their names though... Looking at it, *Chiikun* looks strangely normal."

"You see, Chiikun, he had no interest in names. His name was Ayaminami Hyou, so it became Cheetah, it's that simple."

"Hyou should be a panther, shouldn't it?"

"Sacchan made that retort with an absurdly nice and enthusiastic smile."

"Uwaaa..."

I wouldn't even want to see that from the side...

"'I would gladly let an expert in animals like you manage the investigation work,' with that, Chiikun specialized in seeking."

"So it was a pun?"

"But—his senses were the best. If it was for that, maybe I should have given a proper name to *Team*. If it was Micchan, I wonder how he would have named our

Team..."

"..."

Ayaminami Hyou.

Even after *Team* was dissolved—

He still lived in a prison, being relied upon by Kunagisa Tomo.

"Well...I much prefer *Blue Savant* over *Dead Blue* too. *Dead* is scary and unbearable."

"Yes. It had failed from the start. There was no way to create it—to create Ii-chan's imitation. Everything was useless. Ahaha, I did a bad thing to everyone. Well, Nacchan and Sacchan and Chiikun all had fun, so I don't really need to apologize, but even then, Boku-sama-chan made some fine adults accompany me for my model building, for my miniature garden building. Well...to be precise, that was just for killing time."

"...Killing time?"

"Oops. My mouth slipped. Umm, as I thought, it's difficult to talk seriously with Ii-chan. I can't grasp the timing. To be honest, I had quite a lot of serious talks with Jun-chan, but—um, but, well, killing time."

"..."

I once confronted Utsurigi Gaisuke with questions. Why did Kunagisa Tomo do it—why did she create *Team* and act like a terrorist? Why did the Savant become the Dead? Why in the world did she impose that on herself at that time?

Utsurigi answered.

Because...

Because she wished for it...?

That's...

"Killing time."

Kunagisa repeated.

"Killing time until Ii-chan came back from the ER3 System."

"...So you thought I would return."

"I didn't think you would drop out, though. But that way was better. I planned on waiting ten years, but *Team* lost nearly half of its lifetime with *Fox*'s appearance."

"...It seems that Mr. Fox eroded more into your life than I thought. Well, for that person, it was just something trivial, so it's dubious whether he even remembers that..."

Rather, no matter how much of a *connection* there was with Jun-san and Magokoro, if he knew, he would have touched a bit on it. The fox-masked man probably didn't know that *The Verge of Death* controlling *Team* was Kunagisa Tomo.

Umm.

Maybe she wasn't that famous.

Then the question became why Iria-san knew about that...

Was it related to the circumstances of that island?

"Ii-chan came back. As expected."

"..."

"He came back to meet Boku-sama-chan." Kunagisa said. "His dead friend and Boku-sama-chan overlapped. That was the reason why he dropped out, right? Ufufu, in that sense, Boku-sama-chan properly had Ii-chan in the palm of my hands."

"In the palm—"

"Ii-chan is...

"No matter who he looks at, he can only think about

Boku-sama-chan."

"No matter who he likes or hates, everything is compared to Boku-sama-chan. How is that person similar to Kunagisa Tomo, how are they not similar to Kunagisa Tomo, that evaluation comes first—Boku-sama-chan is too absolute to be comparable, but at the same time is the evaluation basis for comparison."

"..."

"Ii-chan loves Boku-sama-chan. He couldn't live without Boku-sama-chan."

Kunagisa Tomo not existing—

Was the same as no one existing.

Was the same as me not existing.

Then maybe that wasn't something on the level of like or hate.

Like the air.

Like water.

Like the sky.

Like the sun—the same as that.

"...Is that your curse?"

"Yes!"

Kunagisa agreed with all her might.

"That's right, Ii-chan."

"..."

"Ii-chan, do you like the air?"

I don't know.

"Ii-chan, do you like water?"

I don't know.

"Ii-chan, do you like the sky?"

I don't know.

"Ii-chan, do you like the sun?"

I don't know.

"Ii-chan, do you like—Kunagisa Tomo?"

"...I don't know."

I said.

The same words I once told Utsurigi.

"You... What in the world do you want to hear from me? What are you trying to make me say? Tomo... What do you want me to say? Should I say that I hate you? If I hated you, would you be satisfied? If that's the case—

"Could you properly die?"

Without any regret.

Being able to die peacefully?

At the very least, for her death to be peaceful.

"That may be the case."

Kunagisa answered, as if she really didn't care.

As if saying she had no interest in that.

That she had no interest or concern,

Towards her dying.

"If that were the case, would Ii-chan hate me? If Boku-sama-chan requested that Ii-chan hate me?"

"If you're fine with a lie."

"As I said, be it the truth or a lie, it doesn't matter. If Ii-chan says it then I will believe anything."

I—

If it is Kunagisa Tomo, anything is fine.

"If it is Ii-chan, anything is fine."

"..."

"Aah, you don't need to think seriously about it. That was just a question, a problem. I wanted to ask, just in case. You don't need to worry, that's not my intent. At this point, Boku-sama-chan's mood is the last thing I am

concerned about. Because moods can be changed to anything. Right, if I had to die—I want to die after suffering a lot. I want to feel like I am living."

Feeling...that I am alive.

Those words,

I heard them strangely.

They reasoned bizarrely.

As if...that was some kind of keyword.

Because I was living as if I was dead?

No, not that, it was something else—

Magokoro.

In this case—Omokage, Magokoro.

The Orange Seed.

That orange friend...

"Pain is the proof of being alive. For your heart or your body, if wounds come with pain, then being hurt isn't that bad, is it?"

Pain.

In other words, being alive.

Being in contact with the world.

Being connected.

"That's why Boku-sama-chan is only thinking about Ii-chan."

"About...me."

"So you know. In reality, I wanted to quickly reveal the secret and enjoy the remainder of my life playfully with Ii-chan, like in a cancelled manga's ending, but Ii-chan..."

"..."

"Ii-chan was delighted."

He was really...delighted.

Even though I thought he would be disappointed—he was delighted.

Even though I intended it to be a trivial mean joke.

Even though I intended it to be a final mean joke.

I was being playful, and failed.

I failed at the end.

Kunagisa said.

"Therefore, I am thinking about giving a reward to Ii-chan, now. Because Nacchan set the stage, I decided to release Ii-chan."

"Release...what?"

"Boku-sama-chan's things will stay at Boku-sama-chan's side—that's Boku-sama-chan's doctrine, but I can't really take them to the other world. Even then, I am thinking about at least taking those memories with me, but... Yes. I was hesitating until now, I really couldn't decide—if possible, I wanted to wait until the time was up. Those were Boku-sama-chan's true thoughts...but now I just decided."

"For Ii-chan, I will release even the memories here."

"...Why?"

"As I said, I'm releasing you. Releasing. I will lift the curse. The curse that Boku-sama-chan continuously put on Ii-chan everyday for the past six years."

Kunagisa said.

"Boku-sama-chan cursed Ii-chan over and over so that he would be Boku-sama-chan's, making him unable to see anyone but Boku-sama-chan, making him unable to hear anyone but Boku-sama-chan. I will release that.

I will release you of those chains.

So—after that, do as you like."

"Do...as I like, you say."

"You have people you want to save, don't you? You have people you want to protect, don't you? You have a lot of important people—important people apart from Boku-sama-chan, don't you? Then Ii-chan needs to cherish them. Help them, protect them, cherish them."

"But compared to you, they—"

"You don't need to compare anymore."

"...But...now, everything is over. The fight with Mr. Fox is already over. That person already said he won't lay a hand on me. So—"

"It's not finished at all."

Kunagisa said.

It's not finished at all.

That...may have been the case.

Shigai Touno—Utage Kudan, what she said to Kunagisa, how much she explained things, I didn't know...but certainly... It wasn't over.

Furuyari Zukin.

Miotsukushi Misora.

Miotsukushi Takami.

Ichirizuka Konomi.

Those events at the Imperial Garden—

That tragedy was only a few hours ago.

"It's not finished at all."

"But Tomo. For me, you are...way more important than the world, the Story or any of that spiritualism and fodder science and fodder philosophy—"

"Hmm. So...

"So would you die with me?"

As if that...

That was abrupt, as if that was her true feelings.

"Jumping from here with Boku-sama-chan."

Kunagisa fluttered her legs.

One hundred and forty meters above the ground.

No wind.

As usual, no wind.

As if saying that it was impossible to fall by accident.

"Throwing everything away. Sacrificing the rest of the world, abandoning everyone around us, jumping from here and dying with Boku-sama-chan?"

"..."

"I would be glad if Ii-chan would die with me."

I—

I thought.

I thought about a lot of things.

About everything up to now.

About that sandbox.

About six years ago. About the blue boy. About the blue girl. About playing innocently—in the middle of the Kunagisa Syndicate. About resolving myself to fight the world. About losing against the world. About running away. About encountering the same fate in my next destination. About coming back. About going to meet her. About everything after that.

About the roof.

About Kunagisa, about everything.

About the course from before to now.

The difference—the difference between before and now.

The error between now and before.

I thought.

I desperately thought.

And...I.

I looked at her.

Beside me,

The girl, beside me as if it were natural,

Sitting pleasantly beside me.

She, too, looked at me.

For the first time in a long time,

For the first time in six years, I felt like I met Kunagisa Tomo.

And I said.

I answered—her question.

"No way."

I answered her feelings.

"I cannot do that."

"...Uni."

Kunagisa,

Looked disappointed from the bottom of her heart.

"The battery—it ran out."

"...Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Sorry... Really, sorry. I didn't mind throwing everything away for your sake...I didn't mind dying, but... Now, I cannot—I cannot die. I..."

I.

I said with resolve and determination.

"I don't want to die."

Right, Kunagisa lightly accepted.

I received her words from the front.

"Then...at the very least." Then she said. "The friend Ii-chan sees Boku-sama-chan in...save her."

"...Did you hear about that from Touno-san?"

"Even if I hadn't, I would notice. The Orange Seed—professor Kyouichirou was quite conscious about that."

But...

Save her.

Save her, what did she mean?

Although Magokoro was now fine.

Although she should...have been fine.

"...Promise me, Ii-chan. That you will at least protect that friend."

"..."

"In the end, Ii-chan couldn't protect or save his little sister or Boku-sama-chan—he couldn't even take his revenge or his vengeance, but unrelated to that—"

"Yeah, I swear."

I—I will set Magokoro free.

That was what I decided.

I will release her.

From various chains.

"I promise. At least that."

"Mm. Then."

Smiling lightly.

Smiling as always.

With a cute smile.

She.

Kunagisa Tomo,

Lifted the curse she put on me six years ago.

The curse she continued to put on me for six years.

"Ii-chan, I hate you."

Then, she jumped down.

Suddenly, lightly—towards the interior.

The height of the fence.

The sound of landing.

She continued to walk.

I wanted to turn back.

I wanted to stop her.

But, it was all too late.

Everything was at a dead end.

What was it, I wondered curiously.

Just...from something like dying.

Was my connection with Kunagisa so weak that just from dying, it would be lost?

Was our fate that shallow?

Of course, for me, originally a normal civilian, and the Kunagisa Syndicate's direct descendant—there shouldn't have been a connection in the first place.

Even then, we met.

We met and fell in love with each other.

I stole Kunagisa's heart—

And Kunagisa held me by the heart.

Then it should have been fine like that.

This should have been a fitting end.

Kunagisa Tomo.

Kunagisa Tomo's Tomo is for friend.

Kunagisa and I...

I wonder what kind of pair of friends we looked like from the outside.

Probably frightening.

Like under endless inertia.

Unbalanced.

Dubious whether we were in gear—

Despite that, being conscious of each other,

Strangely dependent on each other—those kinds of friends.

But that was a good form for us.

I won't say that we were a pair as one.

If we could stay friends, that would be enough.

That felt the best.

Kunagisa Tomo—Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo, Kunagisa Tomo—

"Even though I like her."

Even though...I like her so much.

There are things that you can't do anything about with just that in this world—I knew that, that's why I didn't like anyone, I didn't compete with anyone, I didn't get close to anyone...

Where did I collapse?

Who made me go astray?

I resent you, Tomo.

Why didn't you stall me more properly and firmly and clearly?

Why didn't you let the me drenched in sin and corruption—

Stay stalled forever?

No...

It's not...that.

If I was responsible for making Kunagisa's time, which had stopped for a long time, move again as Shigai Touno said, this conclusion was something I wished for.

I changed.

I started moving.

That was why.

That was what I'd asked for.

Therefore, Kunagisa.

Kunagisa released me.

She lifted the spell cast on me.

"Yo."

Clank.

The fence beside me rang.

Without any footsteps getting closer, without anything, Zerozaki calmly sat in the position where Kunagisa had been just a moment prior, as if that were his usual place.

For once,

He didn't have his usual smile.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"...Right." I nodded. "For now, you stay there in silence."

"Is it fine here?"

"That's the best place."

"Hmm."

"Because, even though your personality is bad, you have a cute face. Well, though not as much as Kunagisa, but you can still serve to rest my eyes."

"...Is that blue one your woman?"

"Were you watching?"

"I passed by her. She smiled very happily."

"Hmm. Well, she's not mine. I was her man, and I was thrown away just now."

"Lame."

"Shut up. Didn't I tell you to be silent?"

"I can't believe that line came out of your mouth."

Then, Zerozaki finally laughed, "Kahahah.".

And you are a demonic killer born from a smile, I

thought.

A demonic killer with a splendid smile, it wasn't even funny.

"...Touno-san... What did she do?"

"Ahn? Aah, that weird woman."

"You didn't kill her, did you?"

"..."

"Why are you silent?"

"It's a joke. No, um, well, that woman and her comrades, there were kind of a lot. Five in total. I talked with them for a bit."

"Talk?"

The bunch from that *Team* and Zerozaki Hitoshiki, cyberterrorists and a demonic killer, what kind of exciting conversation could they have had?

"Yeah. By chance, we had a common acquaintance—I heard some interesting stories. Also stories about you."

"Are you a housewife? Don't collect information from idle gossip."

"I'm surprisingly good at collecting information, you know. Well not as much as that *Chiikun* or something, though."

"..."

Well, certainly, if you were able to draw out information about *Chiikun* from that bunch who stay together despite being on bad terms, you'd be pretty impressive.

"But it looks like that woman didn't know the reason you were attacked at that Imperial Garden. I tried getting it out using various ways, but...she only knows that the *Miotsukushi*, those twins, were trying to kill you there—apparently, she didn't know the Space Creator was there."

"Hmm..."

"There seems to be an error in communication which crumbled the balance of the situation... That woman said things like 'There is no way for Ichirizuka to go against Mr. Fox's will, so there must be circumstances', but essentially, that just means she doesn't know anything."

"Right."

At this point, I don't even have to say that, unlike *Team*, the people from the *Thirteen Stairs* don't seem to have any solidarity—then that means that Touno-san came to my apartment not only to inform me about Kunagisa but to also transmit that fact.

If before I met up with Kunagisa,

If I were killed, it would've been bad.

"But really, that Admiral—so that was what Aniki found fishy... Well, it's fine. It doesn't matter. It's past stuff. Err, those guys went somewhere. I didn't really chase after them though."

"I see..."

Went somewhere. Then Shigai Touno will probably stop being Utage Kudan, and will stop being in the *Thirteen Stairs*. She will betray the fox-masked man, four thousand and forty-one times.

I'm sure these guys,

Will not leave Kunagisa Tomo's side.

Unlike me.

They could probably die for Kunagisa Tomo's sake.

"So, Defective Product. What are you going to do now?"

"Mm..."

"To be frank, I'm quite hungry myself." Zerozaki said. "You can't have that attitude against the person who

saved your life just because you got rejected by a woman, right?"

"...Right."

I raised my hung down face.

Looked at the sky.

The blue sky.

The blue sky—I like it.

That was what I thought.

"For now, let's head back to the apartment. If you're fine with water, I can let you drink however much you want."

"I'm telling you to let me eat a meal."

"Yes, yes."

I jumped down the fence.

Now, let's switch our feelings.

Though that's impossible, I thought.

I needed to go, even by forcing myself.

I needed to go, even by crawling.

I needed to go back to the apartment.

Anyhow,

At least Magokoro.

I should at least not lose Magokoro.

Goodbye, Kunagisa Tomo.

You go die.

I will kill you and go on living.

ACT 18 – A CONTINUATION THAT DOESN'T END

0

Ultimately, the world is off the mark.
It is made from piling up mistakes.
So don't try to solve it with reason.

1

Avoiding the Miotsukushi Sisters' massacre and meeting Shigai Touno—Utage Kudan—at the Imperial Garden all occured on the night of October thirty-first. That means, the time I'm experiencing now is—the morning of November 1st.

October ended.

The month that the fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi, despised so much.

He said that he hated it because too many people died.

Not dying in September, dying in October.

October being over... Around me, and around the fox-masked man—in the end, how many died?

Niounomiya Izumu, and strictly speaking, Niounomiya Rizumu too.

Ishinagi Moeta.

Kino Raichi.

Furuyari Zukin—the eleventh and the twelfth.

Kunagisa wasn't dead yet, so counting just them, six people?

Six people.

The part of me that would have thought this number of deaths wasn't too many must have been completely done for..

Just six people.

While in the passenger seat of the Fiat 500, for some reason, that thought crossed my mind.

In the driver's seat, the demonic killer.

Zerozaki was the one to say "As if I could leave the wheel to a guy that just got rejected by a woman." His reasoning was absurd, but well, I could feel some sympathy and kindness in those words, so I obediently accepted.

I honestly felt some kindness.

However...I was not as depressed as Zerozaki seemed to be worried about, nor was I confused, and most importantly, I was not hurt.

There was no pain.

Those wounds had no pain.

As if the suffering had been interrupted.

Even though...I thought I would be more panicked.

Even though I thought I would bawl and draw closer to Kunagisa.

Did I accept it—the reality that Kunagisa would die?

To think it was that simple.

Hearing Shigai Touno's words, running back to Senbon Nakadachiuri, borrowing the keys from Miiko-san at the apartment, taking the minimum amount of baggage, going to the parking lot, starting up the fiat—arriving to the building in Shirosaki with Zerozaki and Touno-san.

Finding Kunagisa, who wasn't in her room, on the roof.

At that time,

I had completely, without any doubt, accepted all and everything.

Wounds.

Wounds without pain.

That was because—as Kunagisa had said herself, she had properly and clearly foreshadowed it—I think.

By this point,

Kunagisa had lifted the curse on me.

She untied them—untied the chains.

Of course, I won't say I was refreshed.

I couldn't feel like a weight was taken off my back.

But...

It was a fact that my body was lighter.

As if it was floating.

As if I was in the sky.

As if—as if I was on the moon.

"..."

I certainly—became light.

But that was...only because I lost something important—I felt like I had a big hole in my heart.

As if I had lost my heart.

That's why this was—emptiness.

Like before meeting Kunagisa—lacking anything inside.

Then, at first.

At first...

At first, at that time, it was revenge...

Now.

At the current point—

"I will tell you about me."

Zerozaki suddenly cut in.

"Ahn?"

"A story about Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"...I don't really care."

"Kahahah. Why, why, even though you're impatiently eager to hear it. I swear, you mister bashful."

"Did the ink of your tattoo reach all the way into your brain?"

"It's fine, just listen."

"What, don't meddle... Are you an ill-mannered drunkard?"

"There aren't any well-mannered drunkards."

"There are. Women that undress and women that become kiss demons when getting drunk. There are plenty of them present at my uni."

"Heeh, then arrange me a mixer with those girls sometimes—wait, not that."

Zerozaki Hitoshiki went along with the joke.

I mean, I was talking about Mikoko-chan and Emoto-chan though.

"You know, it's very rare for me to talk about myself—I have lead quiiite an interesting life. Just forget that you got rejected by a woman."

"..."

I don't know why, but apparently 'being rejected by a woman' was a severe case that required that much attention. Did he have some weird trauma or something? Well, I felt like half of it might have been a misunderstanding, but it wasn't that off the mark, so because we had some time before getting to the apartment, I guess I could listen to his story.

"Got it. Then I'll listen."

"Yes."

The moment he nodded, the traffic lights suddenly went red, so Zerozaki stepped on the brake and stopped the car. It was early in the morning, so the road was calm.

Thinking about it, this guy definitely didn't have a license...

In spite of that, he carefully checked the back mirror. His driving skill was better than Emoto-san's but worse than Hikari-san's. Well, most people are included in that range.

"Reuniting the fragments of info I got from that denim woman with braids and what I heard in the car from that weird woman, you probably have a good idea of the Zerozaki Clan's origin, but—just in case, to be sure, I'll explain it. The Zerozaki Clan is a gathering of demonic killers."

"Yeah. Something like a guild, right?"

"No, more like a gathering of weirdos. Full of weirdos and eccentrics, it's a wonder how I stayed normal. Like a certain little sister maniac who joyfully swings around a pair of scissors or an admiral who swings a nail bat while wearing a straw hat, or even a vegetarian whose hobby is to gouge out intestines and coil them around his body; this kind of somewhat different group of demonic killers."

"...Wasn't there a really graphic one mixed in there?"

"By the way, the scissors guy, nail bat guy, and intestine guy make up the Three Heavenly Kings of the Zerozaki Clan."

"So half-assed..."

Can't you at least get one more...?

...Well, however...I'd already heard that part.

The eccentricity, the way the Zerozaki Clan was abhorred,

And—

That Zerozaki Clan was now—

"Every demonic killer in the Zerozaki Clan had a screw loose in their head. All of them were lunatics and scoundrels, and I grew up among them. I was raised as a

demonic killer."

"A demonic killer from birth, a natural born killer, right?"

"Yeah. I'll say this just in case, but the *natural born* type is pretty rare in the Zerozaki Clan. In most cases, they just *someday suddenly* become demonic killers."

"Someday suddenly?"

"Like being *possessed by an evil spirit*."

Possessed by an evil spirit.

That somehow felt like a simile.

"...From what I heard, in your case, *both parents* were demonic killers, is that true?"

"Well, yeah."

The traffic light changed, so Zerozaki answered as he made the car take off.

"So, among the clan, I was in a special position—though I say *clan*, we generally don't have any blood relationships. *Blood relationship.* If blood is thicker than water, then the Niounomiya Art Troupe and its branches' connections are much stronger."

"They are all brothers and sisters, after all."

"If the *Niounomiya* have blood relationships, the *Zerozaki* have lineage; that's the best way of putting it. Well, that kind of stuff is just a trivial difference, but in the middle of that trivial difference is where I was born." Zerozaki said, as if it was someone else's business. "Between a demonic killer called the Ultimate and a demonic killer called the Absolute."

"..."

A pure-blooded Zerozaki.

Chaste and pure-bred.

I see, in that sense—

"It's similar to that blue one." Zerozaki said. "Zerozaki Zeroshiki and Zerozaki Hataori—those are the names of my parents. The decisive names of those two demonic killers. That said, I have almost no memory of them."

"No memory? Why?"

"They were already dead before my brain acquired any semblance of memory. I was far from aware of my surroundings, I was zero years old. After that, I—well, a lot happened, and in the end, I grew up as a man of the clan. I grew up as a demonic killer. So, I guess I'm a special case among them."

"Just from what I heard, it seems vague...but is there something like a *requirement* to enter the *Zerozaki* clan?"

"Ahn?"

"It's not like any demonic killer can enter the clan, can they?"

"Well, yeah. If there was to be a *requirement*—no, I guess there's none. Maybe there wasn't. Right, it may be better to think that people who lack all sorts of *qualifications* end up becoming *Zerozakis*."

"Hmm..."

I nodded.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki's roots.

It's not like they overlapped with me until now. They overlapped to some degree with Kunagisa on the surface—that was probably why Zerozaki decided to talk about it—but it didn't have anything to do with me.

But...

Or, as a result,

I felt an even stronger sympathy for Zerozaki.

This guy—he really was my mirror image.

"...Hey, Zerozaki."

"Um?"

"Did you know? Um, that the Zerozaki Clan you belong to...was annihilated."

"Yeah." Zerozaki nodded without missing a beat. "I already heard from that denim girl with braids. Haah..."

"..."

Zerozaki sighed, as if he was absorbed in his thoughts.

Naturally, I didn't add anything.

I didn't know what to say.

"...That woman, her atmosphere, it was kind of erotic."

"Don't get absorbed in worthless thoughts."

"And she was tall."

"I already understand your taste in women very well. Continue your story now."

"You really are no fun. Well, it seems that the denim woman with braids thought I was dead too. After all, among the Zerozaki Clan, I am a secret amongst secrets. My existence in itself isn't very known."

"A secret amongst secrets? Why?"

"If people knew that **someone like me** exists, it wouldn't be a joke. The Zerozaki Clan is built upon an unexpectedly frail foundation, a house of cards." Kahaha, Zerozaki laughed self-deprecatingly. "However, even that, at this point... Also—although we were annihilated, there should be one more survivor."

"One more?"

"No one in the clan knew that she *became* a *Zerozaki*—only me and that Strongest woman knew... Unless she left the world on her own, she should still be alive."

"..."

I didn't know who Zerozaki meant by *her*, but I couldn’t overlook the word Strongest.

Right.

I never really cleared it up until now, but—

"Zerozaki. You—in May, weren't you killed by Aikawa-san?"

"If I was, I wouldn't be here. Can't you see these long legs?"

"I don't see any long legs."

"Mm. I was about to get killed, but...I somehow survived."

"What?"

"I guess she did it for our sake—that being said, that Strongest woman, she really has no mercy. Honestly, I was ready to die. But—"

But, he said.

Zerozaki went silent.

I knew he wasn't the kind of guy to pointlessly go silent, so he probably didn't want to say the rest. I understood that. Something...must have happened. Did it concern the person he called *her*?

However, I didn't need to forcibly ask that.

It wouldn't be too late—

It wouldn't be too late to get the answer to that question after confirming Aikawa-san's safety. If I were to believe the Miotsukushi Sisters, at the very least, she was alive—

"Hey, Zerozaki."

Therefore, I changed the topic.

"Well, setting the details aside, the current situation is as you heard from Touno-san and nothing more. So, hearing that, what did you think?"

"Ahn?"

"I still haven't heard your impressions."

"Hm. When I think that you disturbed my quiet and comfortable life for such a crazy reason, apart from feeling like killing you, nothing much."

"Is that so."

"It must have been a great bother for Izumu. Being forcibly drawn out by you."

"..."

That reminds me, I still haven't asked about his relationship with Izumu-kun. I was too busy explaining my situation that I asked nearly nothing about what Kouta-san talked about. He was abroad—probably somewhere nearby the ER3 System—that should be right...

"No, what I want to ask is if you know anything, even something small, about Saitou Takashi, the fox-masked man."

Originally, there must have been a reason to search for Zerozaki.

A reason for the fox-masked man to choose him—choose him as his *enemy*.

There should have been a connection sufficient to serve as a reason.

If I was Zerozaki Hitoshiki's alternative.

However, Zerozaki,

"I don't."

Said that.

"No, it's not like I don't know anything at all—I have some knowledge about the famous scientist Saitou Takashi and I know the legend about the great world war between the Strongest and the Worst, the *Falcon* and the *Fox*, ten years ago—it's a famous story among the *Killing Names*. But that's not directly connected to my life. Even

among those *Thirteen Stairs*, although there are some that I know of, the only one I've actually met is Izumu..."

"Hmm..."

So it was too good to be true?

In the end, the insurance was just insurance?

But—it's not like I completely believed in the fox-masked man's pet theory, but at this point, having the Story advance this much—I couldn't accept that there was no connection whatsoever between Saitou Takashi and Zerozaki Hitoshiki...

Hmm.

Then maybe that *her* or Zerozaki's parents, the Ultimate and the Absolute demonic killers, have a connection with him...? No, that would be too forced, too far fetched. However, it was true that there was a certain level of obsession that the fox-masked man showed towards Zerozaki—if that wasn't the case, I wouldn't be in such a situation.

No...

That situation should already have been over.

It was over.

It should've been.

The fox-masked man stopped treating me as his enemy. He swore to not lay a hand on me. Of course, I still couldn't explain last night's attack by the Miotsukushi Sisters and Ichirizuka Konomi, but...

"Umm. That would mean you had no reason to come all the way to Kyoto."

"Didn't I save your life?"

"My, my, acting like a messiah just because of that? Just how many times do you think I saved you?"

"You haven't saved me even once."

"Well, yeah."

"Hey, me."

"What is it, me?"

"I certainly don't know that *fox-masked man*. However, I can give you one piece of advice."

"Advice?"

"You said it, didn't you? The chains put on that Magokoro—that they will soon be released."

"Mm? Yes? Rurero-san said that sometime around today should be the time limit. Well, they have been gradually loosening up until now, so they are already mostly gone... They should soon be completely released."

"It's probably impossible, you know."

Zerozaki said bluntly.

Without any hesitation, using straightforward words.

"That blue one said the same thing too, right? Although I have no idea on what basis she said that, I have grounds that allow me to affirm it."

"Grounds..."

"Migishita Rurero and Kino Raichi. I don't know about these two. I don't know what kind of people they are. However, the third entangling chain, one of the managers, Tokinomiya Jikoku—that guy is dangerous."

"...Dangerous... Because he is a *Cursing Name*? But as far as *Cursing Names* go, Kino-san is also one—"

"I'm not saying that the *Cursing Names* in and of themselves are dangerous. Even the *Tokinomiya* aren't that big of a deal—in fact, I saw the corpse of one of them just the other day. But the **individual** Tokinomiya Jikoku—he is too alarming to overlook."

"...? How can you say that much?"

"Because I know of him. The man called Tokinomiya

Jikoku."

"What are you saying? Didn't you just say that you haven't met any members of the *Thirteen Stairs* except for the former member Izumu-kun? Take responsibility for what you say."

"I just said I haven't met him. It's true that I just know his name. The *Cursing Names* aren't the kinda guys to appear much in front of others in the first place. It's like, how should I say it, well, they're like Tsuchinokos."

"Hm. But—"

"Just listen to people's stories until the end. You see, Tokinomiya Jikoku is—Hey, what do I even have to explain this stuff? It's a pain, so can I stop?"

"No, say it properly. I'll listen until the end."

"Is that the attitude of someone making a request? In the first place—aah, well, it's fine. You, do you already understand what the *Cursing Names* are?"

"I understand. I do, I think."

"And that the *Tokinomiya* are the group ranking first place?"

"I know."

"Then."

Zerozaki said.

"For example, if there was a person **exiled** even by those *Tokinomiyas*—what would you think about that?"

"..."

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Thought Manipulator.

"*Tokinomiya Jikoku* is, in addition to being the individual's name, the name attributed for generations to those exiled from the *Tokinomiya*."

"So... Is he famous?"

"No, it's about *Cursing Names* so it's not famous at all. He's a no-name, the kind whose story no one knows. Let me see—the same way I am a secret amongst secrets in the Zerozaki Clan, Tokinomiya Jikoku is a secret amongst secrets for the *Tokinomiya*. That's why me knowing about him is a coincidence approaching the level of a miracle. Long ago, you see—long ago, I heard it by chance from a woman we put up a common front with. According to her,

"If you were to hypothetically attempt to handle Tokinomiya Jikoku, you would need meticulous caution and strict wariness—"

She said.

"...Meticulous caution and...strict wariness...?"

Hold...

Hold on.

That kind of thing... That delicate factor, the fox-masked man doesn't have an ounce of it, does he...? He's the kind of person who doesn't care about anything if it's to end the world, you know... Even his daughter, his granddaughter, the existence he called his enemy, and of course, even himself—he really doesn't care from the bottom of his heart, that person...

That means, Tokinomiya Jikoku.

What in the world did he do to Magokoro...?

Calm down.

It's not decided yet. If I believe Rurero-san's words, Tokinomiya Jikoku didn't have the time to do anything superfluous—

"But you have no guarantee that this Rurero isn't caught up in Tokinomiya Jikoku's *Thought Manipulation*, right?"

"..."

"A will as tough as the *fox-masked man's*—as lunacy as lunatic as his wouldn't be easy to dominate with Thought Manipulation, though."

I wonder...

Rurero-san...and Kino-san, the possibility of them being under the influence of Tokinomiya Jikoku... They were both professionals, so the probability of them falling for it should've been even lower than the fox-masked man's, but...

But setting aside the Thought Manipulation.

Magokoro.

When Magokoro escaped from the fox-masked man—from his management, from his surveillance—even though Kino-san was killed and Rurero-san received serious injuries, **Tokinomiya Jikoku was the only one uninjured**. That minor detail—

Being suspicious of that should be warranted.

It is something important enough to raise suspicion.

A coincidence...?

From Magokoro's perspective, it wasn't a coincidence. She aimed for a time when Tokinomiya Jikoku was absent—then **from Tokinomiya Jikoku's perspective**, how did it look?

Also.

If I said it like this Magokoro would probably get mad and deny it head on, but—even if Tokinomiya Jikoku had the strongest influence on Magokoro's mind, aiming for when he was absent and running away—wouldn't that mean that Magokoro avoided confrontation with Tokinomiya Jikoku?

Wouldn't that mean she escaped?

DId Tokinomiya Jikoku—did he have something that warranted so much consideration?

An inevitability that made Omokage Magokoro avoid him.

An inevitability that made The Orange Seed run away from him.

Then...

"...Rather, the woman you put up a common front with, she's quite a weird woman. When talking about *Tokinomiya Jikoku* that she understood as *dangerous*, she talked as if *using him* was a premise. Is it someone from the *Killing Names* or *Cursing Names*? Or is it that *her*?"

"No, that's not the case. That woman—how do I say it? Umm, although we put up a common front, I haven't seen her face to face, and in the end, I didn't ask for her name either...and now I can't even confirm whether she was a woman or not."

"Hey hey. Are you accepting the words of someone whose face, name and even gender you don't know?"

"I do. They have that amount of worth."

"..."

I was a bit surprised.

Because I didn't think that this human failure could put that much faith in someone's existence. That demonic killer who answered without any hesitation when I asked him whether there was someone he liked.

Hmm...

In this case, I guess I should praise that *woman*.

Who could she be?

I felt like she could unexpectedly be someone I already knew...

"We're soon gonna reach the parking lot. Do you have a

fixed space to park?"

"Park it wherever it's easiest to. It's made so that I can park anywhere."

In reality I shouldn't, but, well, that's how it is. Like a common agreement between the people ranting the parking space.

"...By the way, that Yukariki Ichihime, was she the disciple of the one called *Zig Zag*?"

"And she was also my disciple. What about her?"

"Nah...nothing."

"Hmm?"

Really, fate's relationships are too much of a masterpiece—mumbling something along those lines, Zerozaki backed and parked the Fiat in the same spot as it was before. Opening the door and getting out of the car, we headed towards the apartment, walking next to each other.

Turning the corner,

The rundown apartment had collapsed.

2

"Wh...what?"

Without thinking, that was my initial impression.

What is that?

Are you an idiot?

It was unrealistic—enough to make me think that.

"..."

Even the human failure—

He couldn't close his gaping open mouth.

His mouth was vacantly and widely opened.

The rundown apartment—it had collapsed.

Rather than collapsed, in crumbles.

I mean... It was an old building.

A two-story wooden house built however many dozens of years ago.

If you said that it was built before the war, anyone would believe you.

Some may even believe that it was built before the Meiji era.

But,

It was reduced to smithereens, leaving nothing behind.

Demolished... Right, looking at the state of the building, it must have been some kind of power shovel or other legitimate means that demolished the building, that was the only explanation for destruction of that degree.

If I were to purposely choose another explanation—

It was like a truck ran into it.

Like if there was a great disaster class earthquake...

But that kind of thing was impossible.

Whether it was an earthquake or truck, neither could attack objects with that much precision. Both the adjacent buildings were unharmed except, for some dust. Only the objects in the territory of the rundown apartment collapsed.

Lumber.

Window glass.

Roof tiles.

Doors.

And—furniture, supplies.

Furniture... Supplies?

Huh, hey, hold on...

"This... What happened to the people inside?"

Zerozaki asked the question I had in my mind.

"It being this early in the morning, everyone should have been at home."

"...!"

Because of the hour, there were few onlookers.

But there were some here and there.

People looking at the collapsed scene.

Among them—none were present.

No one was there.

Neither Miiko-san nor Houko-chan nor Koutoumaru-san nor Nanananami—and,

Neither was Omokage Magokoro.

"...Shit!"

I ignored the people's gazes, rushed into the apartment's ruin amongst the debris, and ascended up the lumber.

Shards of window glass stabbed my hands.

It hurt.

Splinters of the lumber stabbed my skin.

But that kind of thing—it wouldn't stop me.

I didn't stop.

I couldn't stop.

I could not stop.

Under this—

Laying under this, everyone was—

Where? Where? Where? Where were everyone's rooms? I had no idea. The debris-like state of the rundown apartment made it impossible to know even that.

Why...this?

Who...this?

Until just a few hours ago—it was there, wasn't it?

Wasn't it here?

Wasn't everyone here?

I borrowed the Fiat's key from Miiko-san.

What was everyone else...doing?

At that time...my head was filled with Kunagisa.

My mind was full of Kunagisa.

What Houko-chan was doing, what Koutoumaru-san was doing, what Nanananami was doing, I didn't know.

Magokoro—The Orange Seed, what was she doing?

"Fuck, fuck, fuck—"

What's...that?

What in the world happened?

Until yesterday—until just yesterday, it was peaceful, wasn't it? It was peaceful, as if everything was over, wasn't it? Despite that, at the Imperial Garden, the Miotsukushi Sisters came in Zukin-chan's stead.

As if rolling down a slope—as if falling.

As if rolling.

As if collapsing.

Everything went astray.

The madness started.

Miotsukushi Sisters—Utage Kudan.

The separation with—Kunagisa Tomo.

And at last, my residence's collapse?

What was this kind of thing...this absurdity?

I could only imagine a human caused this. I could only think that someone's will was at work. No, of course that was the case. This kind of natural phenomenon was impossible. But that wasn't what I meant, not that, but—when something is about to go well, I immediately lose everything. When I think I can get my hands on something, the next moment, it falls through. It felt like I was being robbed of what had been given to me, like something important had been erased—like I was being moderately and randomly harassed by a whimsical perpetrator that doesn't give a damn. It was a persistent and exuberant sensation—

And I didn't understand the meaning of it.

What kind of necessity was there?

What kind of inevitability was there?

To this phenomenon—

"Drop it."

The person saying that, laying a hand on my shoulder, was not Zerozaki.

Turning my back,

The one there was Kazuhito-san.

Ikaruga Kazuhito.

All black clothes, a necktie, sunglasses.

Kyoto Prefectural Police—Investigation Section One, a detective.

"...We meet again, kid."

"Why...are you here?"

"A report from virtuous civilians."

Kazuhito-san said that while carrying his tobacco in his mouth.

Briefly looking back, Zerozaki was no longer here.

That bastard, he must have fled after seeing the detective. What a terrifying awareness of danger...despite smiling so foolishly, he was tactful in areas like that. I see...unless it's been covered up, that guy could still be on the wanted list of the Kyoto Prefecture Police.

However—

"Are you alone?"

"...Yes, well." I nodded. "More importantly—What about you, Kazuhito-san, are you alone? Are Sasaki-san or the other policemen—"

"Everyone went back."

Kazuhito-san said.

With a truly bothered attitude.

Because of the sunglasses, I couldn't see his expression, but...

"It's been quite a while since the report—people heard a sound resembling fireworks being launched, and when they went to check the building which should have been there, it was apparently gone. It seems they thought it was a natural collapse since the building was old, but just in case, they called 110. That was in the middle of the night."

"..."

"There didn't seem to be any crime, so everyone was withdrawn. And since the place was close to my house, I was told to stay here." Though it's not my street, Kazuhito-san muttered. "Sasa was positioned here until just earlier, but—well, how should I say, that's how it is."

"No—that's how it is, you say...Kazuhito-san. Is there no...crime?"

"None."

"No, isn't this a case...no matter how you look at it? This kind of thing, what can it be except a case?"

"There's no way—we can only call it a case when there are victims. Without victims, we cannot move."

"Victims...?"

"Yeah. There's no crime—**the residents** said the same thing, 'This is not a case'." Kazuhito-san said. "What a frightening bunch, they arranged their stories in an instant. We can't contact the landlord...as usual, this is a messed up apartment."

"...That means!"

I drew closer to Kazuhito-san.

"Everyone—is fine!"

"Fine, not really." Kazuhito-san said, as if the words were coming from his back teeth. "It didn't seem like they were fine. Everyone went to the hospital, after all."

"..."

Although the worst situation was avoided, it wasn't like they didn't suffer any damage from the collapse. In this situation, they were probably saved by the policemen—I guess, but they weren't a bunch to do things normally, so they most likely all bluffed and managed to get through it.

After all, everyone seemed to hate government authority...

But as expected, that government authority wouldn't retreat entirely from this situation immediately—it must have been quite a while since that exchange—probably just after Touno-san, Zerozaki, and I left for Shirosaki.

Just about when the date changed.

When we changed from October to November.

...Ah.

I was struck by an idea and asked Kazuhito-san.

"Um—Kazuhito-san, err, did you meet everyone?"

"Ahn?"

"The residents from the apartment, everyone."

"Of course—well, I also know them by face. That samurai woman, that cute doll girl, that Witch, and that muscly old man—what about it? They're all alive, you know? That being said, the only one able to walk on their own is the Witch."

"...No..."

Magokoro—she wasn't there.

With that remarkable hair, there was no way Kazuhito-san would overlook her.

I indirectly informed him about Hime-chan and Moeta-kun, mixing in a huge amount of lies, but not yet about Magokoro. She was still hidden. Recently Magokoro had started going out in the neighbourhood so he may have known her face, but he didn't think that she was a resident. Right, it was planned. So it was normal that Magokoro wasn't included in Kazuhito-san's list of *everyone*.

However, Magokoro.

Where did she go—

Was she still buried in the debris?

"..."

Thinking like that was foolish.

A horrible deception.

This—

This,

It was obviously Magokoro's doing.

This kind of thing—who else could have done it?

Even if it was old, there were too few existences able to collapse, demolish, and crumble a whole building. The only character left around me able to do something on the same level as when Aikawa Jun and Niounomiya Izumu destroyed Kiyomizu Temple's stage,

Was none other than Magokoro.

That was why everyone shut their mouths.

They erased the crime.

They covered—covered for Magokoro.

Because Omokage Magokoro was already part everyone's family.

But...

In the first place, why...?

Why did Magokoro do something like this?

First, the word rampage came to mind. Magokoro who was released from the three chains, from the *spell*, as Emoto-san, Rurero-san, and the fox-masked man feared, lost control and rampaged...

However, that was impossible.

Magokoro was properly able to control herself.

She could control her own power.

Magokoro's violence was only her own.

Even if the *spell* became zero—even if she failed to control herself, it was hard to imagine it would have reached such a state.

"There's quite a few less onlookers—during the night, there were quite a lot. Hm... Aah, right, right. I have a message from the Witch, kid."

"...What is it?"

Nanananami...

The Worst Witch, Nanananami Nanami.

" 'Don't mind it. It's not your fault.' she said."

"...!"

From her,

From that woman, such words—

They were more hurtful, heavy, harsh, and loud than anything.

Of course, that was probably her aim...

However, she was a woman who didn't say anything but her true thoughts.

"That means, well, it's your fault."

Kazuhito-san said, without any mercy.

I see, I understood.

He wasn't someone to stay on the scene 'for some reason'. Kazuhito-san was waiting for me all this time. He was waiting for me to come back here. To hear from me, the last resident of the apartment.

It was bad...

In this situation where there was no one else around, I couldn't even align my story with the others'—I had no choice but to play dumb. Now that it'd come to it, I was rather thankful that Zerozaki nimbly ran away. It would've been quite forced to suddenly introduce a boy with a tattoo on his face. Everything happened while I was gone, would it be safest to claim that...?

However, what Kazuhito-san said was not an official question related to the apartment's collapse.

"You. Go somewhere."

"...Eh?"

Without thinking, I responded with astonishment.

Kazuhito-san repeated the same words.

Just go somewhere.

"No matter what, this is going too far. This goes well over what we ordinary people can allow."

Kazuhito-san's words had almost no intonation. Like he simply said what he was thinking out loud, that kind of speech.

"It's a building, you know? A proper construction just went missing, you know? Luckily there were no casualties, but it's a case where it wouldn't have been strange if anyone were to die, if they were to be caught up in the damages."

It's a case, Kazuhito-san repeated.

It's a case.

"It's something that shouldn't happen in Japan."

Something that shouldn't happen in Japan.

Those words—I heard them in May too.

If I remember correctly, I heard them from Aikawa-san.

But...Kazuhito-san.

The one pronouncing them now was Kazuhito-san.

"Normally we should conduct a more in depth investigation, but to be frank, everyone from the police withdrew because they were scared. Scared of the cause that collapsed a whole apartment, that demolished it."

"..."

"**Because we are human**. We instinctively understand what's scary. We understand—understand **what kind of things should not be understood**."

"Scared, you say—"

"We're scared of you."

Kazuhito-san said.

"So just go somewhere."

I—

Had no choice but to be silent.

It wasn't really the first time this happened. It had happened many times until now. Being seen as scary, being abhorred, none of it was rare in my life.

Even Suzunashi-san said it to me.

That unknown things are scary.

They are scary because we cannot understand them.

That was natural.

I had no intention of denying natural things.

I had never asked for comprehension in the first place.

But,

Being told that now, in this situation.

Was too—too cruel.

It's cruel, I thought.

It's like whipping a corpse.

Where's the fun in bullying me?

"Don't misunderstand—I like you as an individual, kid. But, even then, I don't have it in me to allow that. Having you, who can create such a terrifying phenomenon, in front of me makes me so scared I might piss my pants."

So scared...

I might piss my pants.

"...But even if you tell me that—"

"It can't be helped. There's nothing I can do. We just understand. That you are scary."

"..."

Scary.

Not scary because they could not understand.

Scary because they could understand.

They comprehended that I was scary.

"I see...exactly. I...strayed away...long ago."

Strayed from the regular path.

In the end...

Not Hikari-san, but Teruko-san was correct, huh.

In reality, it was correct. The apartment collapse, being suddenly confronted with that, I was surprised and dumbfounded in front of this mysterious event, but thinking about it, in the last few months—no, in the last ten months, at the very least, all the actions I'd taken since I came back to the Japan, ever since I came back to this country—

Weren't proper.

A decapitation murder on an isolated island.

A demonic killer appearing in the town of Kyoto.

A schoolgirl capable of training mercenaries.

A research facility trying to intentionally create geniuses.

An undying girl's death.

It's absurd, isn't it?

No, that alone would have still been fine. Even if my life carried abnormalities and superpowers, it's not like I couldn't blend into normal society after just that. Exactly, Aikawa-san, for example, managed to do well with Sasaki-san and Kazuhito-san.

That was...something I couldn't do.

It was impossible.

Therefore, I was being feared.

I wonder, for now it was still fine, but if Kazuhito-san knew—knew the bare and unvarnished truth about me until now, what would his reaction be?

At that time,

I'm sure it wouldn't end with being scared.

I'm sure—I'm sure I would be killed.

I would be persecuted.
I wouldn't be able to live.

Like the former Kunagisa Tomo.

Like the former Omokage Magokoro.
And like the current Omokage Magokoro.
In order to live, I must adapt.
I must adapt cowardly.
Either that, or I must run away.
I must go somewhere.
"..."
That was me.
Just by me being alive, everyone was bothered.
Even though I decided to live.
Even though I denied death.
Even then,
I was about to lose to that reality.
"...My bad. I said too much."
I must have been making quite the pathetic face, which was why Kazuhito-san awkwardly took off his sunglasses and said that line.
I felt like I saw this person's eyes for the first time in a while.
No, it might have been the first time.
That being said, even if Kazuhito-san bowed his head, he didn't withdraw his previous statements.
"They're my true thoughts. I'm sorry."
"..."
"...In any case, we won't interfere with this case anymore. Well, some pressure will be applied from somewhere, like for the corpse of the high school girl found in the Imperial Garden yesterday."

"...High school girl?"

Was it...Zukin-chan?

I see...

Somehow, until now I was awfully worried about the *obvious world,* but Kazuhito-san's few words, those words of rejection—they worked too well.

What happened?

It was a wonder.

For a weak, powerless, and ordinary kid—for whom scattering around in confusion among those with abnormal powers and abnormal talents was a perfect fit—although I say that I'd deviated, a place like that should've been my natural habitat,

But before I knew it,

I had become the biggest heretic.

Had it been this way from the beginning?

Or was it because it was finally the end?

That kind of thing, even now—I don't know.

At the very least, it was decided.

Then—

Either way is the same, I guess.

A phone's ringtone rang. Kazuhito-san took out his phone from inside his suit's pocket.

"Yeah... Okay. Got it. I'll go back."

After saying that briefly, he hung up the phone and looked at me. At this point, he had surely said everything he wanted, so he put back his sunglasses in silence,

"Well then."

And turned his back to me.

Parting words.

I couldn't return them.

Even though I didn't really have any business with him or something to say or something to ask, for some reason, I was filled with the urge to stop Kazuhito-san, but—

Breaking the corner, I could no longer see him, so ultimately I ended up saying nothing, leaving my arm half-assedly extended.

Among the debris.

Looking like: ruins of war, among the debris.

Among lumber and glass and iron scrap.

I, powerlessly,

"...It's just nonsense."

Mumbled.

My shoulders slumped.

At this rate, I was about to fall onto my knees.

My hands—they were full of cuts and blood.

It hurts.

It hurts, I thought.

Pain—wounds.

Wounds accompanied by pain.

This is what it means—to live.

"Nah, a masterpiece, rather."

"..."

...Zerozaki was already back.

What terrifying footwork.

Actually, it seemed he'd never left the vicinity to begin with.

"No, I was actually on top of that building's roof."

"You really are a nimble bastard..."

"He said a lot of things."

"Yeah. I'm hurt."

"Don't mind it. It's just what a commoner thinks."

"If I could dismiss it like that, it would be easy, but

well, I thought of myself as a commoner. So I feel like I've been abandoned by my comrades now."

"Kahahah. Stop worrying by yourself. You have me, don't you?" Zerozaki said. "I came to Kyoto explicitly to save you. Feel free to rely on me."

"Thank you, Zerozaki-fleeing-the-instant-he-sees-a-detective's-face-kun."

"Not at all, no need to thank me. Even if you, the one who created a reason for me to be pursued by the prefecture even though I left no proof, thanked me, it wouldn't feel good."

Zerozaki laughed,

I didn't laugh.

"...Well, for the twelve people in Kyoto, that Strongest might have covered it up—"

"Hmm."

Aikawa-san might have...huh.

"So, what are we gonna do now?" Zerozaki said after looking around us. "This place doesn't really feel like a good spot to sit down and enjoy a good lunch."

"Yes. Someone doing that in the middle of this debris would just be a pervert."

However, ever since before, he'd become a character only interested in food... Was he okay?

"Aren't there valuable objects buried in the rubble? Wanna search for your passport, seal and stuff before some looter comes and steals them?"

"No, that probably won't be necessary."

You would easily understand after kicking around some of the debris.

Among this debris...not a single thing...

Not a single thing—had kept its original form.

The furniture.

The books.

The music CD.

The dumbell racks.

The beds.

The bottles.

The seals.

Everything, from large objects to small ones, was, without anything missing, divided into more than two parts.

Twisted or warped.

Purely—thoroughly.

To an unhealthy extent.

That, well, you would understand by looking closely—you could understand by observing closely. Understand that it wasn't simple destruction driven by violence, but a thorough destruction using simple violence.

A frightening demolition job.

A disproportionately biased demolition job.

Everything,

Was in an irreparable state.

"So the damages for me are just on the level of books... Aah, Miiko-san and Nananami must have taken enormous damage."

Miiko-san had an antique collection and Nanananami collected old books.

Well, there wasn't a thing left untouched.

"I see. Haahn—Aah, it's true, looking at it, it's really true. This place was destroyed thoroughly. Hmm, rather than trying to destroy the objects, it feels more like they were trying to destroy the coordinates themselves. **To the point where they couldn't ever return to their original**

form. At least the principle shouldn't be that far from that."

"Zerozaki. If it was you, could you do something like that?"

"It's not like I don't know a few people—**who could do something on that level**. But people **who could do this**—no matter what, I can't think of any."

And thinking that it was a *process* that took hardly any time, it's no wonder that old guy got scared, Zerozaki said.

"Is it the work of that Magokoro girl?"

"Probably."

"But why?"

"That's... What I want to ask."

"But I'm the one asking."

"Then I will answer that I don't know."

There should have been no reason to rampage.

At the very least, the Magokoro that had become close to this apartment's residents—shouldn't have had any reason to destroy this building and hurt everyone, so why?

I had no idea.

As far as possibilities went, a subordinate of the fox-masked man, one of the *Thirteen Stairs* could have caused this destruction. However, I couldn't find any meaning in forcing that logic just to attach a reason to this.

What should I do?

In this situation...

"For now, we have to go to the hospital. I'm worried about everyone's state...from what Kazuhito-san said, their lives don't seem to be in danger, at least...but even then, I'm worried. Miiko-san and the dakimakura...I mean, Houko-chan, Houko-chan was just discharged from the hospital, so that makes me even more worried.

Also, I need to ask what happened."

"Right. Everyone was at the scene, so they should know something."

"Although it's dubious whether they were able to properly understand what was happening. After all, it must have been an overwhelming destruction that didn't give them time to even blink."

Magokoro—at the Sumiyuri Academy.

Blasting Moeta-kun, sweeping Houko-chan, hitting Aikawa-san, piercing Izumu-kun—that kind of overwhelming destruction.

Grasping that was impossible for ordinary people.

Even more so when it was on a peaceful and uneventful night—everyone except Miiko-san must have been asleep.

Then...

"...It's useless to keep on wondering. Let's go."

Maybe I should contact Rabumi-san in advance—no, if the ambulance transported them, they were not necessarily at the hospital where Rabumi-san was. They should have gone to the closest one...

While sorting out my thoughts, I decided it was best to leave the apartment site alongside Zerozaki for now. Exiting the mountain of debris and looking back, it really looked like a scene of a demolition. An old building being destroyed to make space for a new one. It was a scenery reminiscent of that.

But,

Being old wasn't a bad thing.

To be honest, it wasn't an easy to live in environment, but now that I had no house to rest, what would I do from now on? That doubt was certainly in my head.

As Kazuhito-san said,

Did I only have the option to **go somewhere**?

The one who accomplished that was Suzunashi-san.

The Suzunashi-san who called me scary.

She lived in the mountains.

An ascetic monk and a depraved monk.

But I didn't know whether I was able to become defiant like Suzunashi-san.

"The past, you know, it's important."

Zerozaki said abruptly.

"Because there is a past, there can be a present and a future."

"..."

"But you see, same breed." And Zerozaki continued. "It's not like the present is only constructed from the past—in the same way, the future isn't built from just the past and the present either. That's what I think."

"Then what else can there be? From what else, other than the past, can the present be built? And the future—from what else, other than the past and present, can it be constructed?"

"Who knows. If I knew that, I wouldn't be suffering. It's because we don't know that we live pathetically like this, isn't it?"

Find the answer yourself.

It felt like that was the answer I'd been told.

"In reality, what a masterpiece. ...Hey, Nonsense User. What do you think living is?"

"What is it? So suddenly."

"Answer. What is living?"

"Who knows... Though I feel that asking that of the current me is too cruel."

"I recently came to think of living as *thinking that you are alive*."

"Ahn?"

"In other words—as long as someone doesn't think they are *alive*, they don't count as being alive. It's a definition by process of elimination. Or by negation, I guess? Setting aside what I think myself...for the clan—for the bunch of the Zerozaki Clan, that was probably the case."

"So they repeatedly murder to feel like *they are alive*? Those were murders committed in order to *live*? For a demonic killer, that's too selfish—too shabby of an excuse. The name of the legendary demonic killer's gathering would cry."

"But you know, most of the members of the clan I knew were pathetic guys just like that. In reality, the *Zerozaki*'s killing has no meaning—there's pure bloodthirst—it's a phrase you hear often, but I think the truth is that they might've simply been lonely."

"Lonely...?"

"Not murder committed in order to live. That's just putting on airs. What was important was to be united as a clan. Right, what those guys were yearning for... No, at least for my perverted Aniki—he was only yearning for the sensation of being alive—"

The sensation...of being alive.

Thinking that you are alive.

Living.

If that's the keyword...

"—Watch out!"

Having thought of something, just when we cut the corner, Zerozaki pulled on my collar from the back with all

of his strength.

I was strangled.

Being out of breath, my consciousness was about to get disrupted.

However, Zerozaki didn't care about that and, using all his force, threw me behind himself in one swoop and then jumped backwards himself.

Then.

In the place where we were walking on the sidewalk.

A car came rammed in.

Along with the piercing sound of brakes, it climbed the sidewalk and, just before hitting an electric pole, barely even a few centimeters before—while letting out the strong smell of burning rubber, it stopped.

I fell on my back, hitting the asphalt.

I was dumbfounded.

Not simply because I was surprised,

But because I had seen it before.

Because I recognized that car.

"...Ah."

A white—Mercedes Benz.

S Class.

Zerozaki hopped with regular steps to my side. Showing the intent of protecting me from the individuals inside the car.

But,

That wasn't necessary.

The one who came out of the car was—

"S-sorry."

As expected, Emoto Sonoki-san.

Raincoat and long boots.

I understood that Zerozaki's face turned pale.

"Wh-when I tried to stop the c-car, I, I could see Ikkun... Err, I messed up and stepped on the accelerating pedal, and lost the handle—"

"..."

Didn't that mean she tried to kill me by running me over?

And,

Clank, the door on the side of the passenger seat opened.

"...Ah."

From there, Rurero-san got out.

A body bound in bandages, gauze and a corset—while her appearance still looked painful, in the last half-month she was somehow able to recover enough to at least walk on her own.

Rurero-san looked at me,

"Hah—"

And smiled in a stylish way.

"It's been a while, *Ii-chan*. I'm glad you seem healthy."

"...Thank you."

Emoto Sonoki.

Migishita Rurero.

Why...were those two here?

Before thinking about that—for now, I was relieved. I was finally able to be at ease.

Miotsukushi Sisters.

Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami—since they dealt with Furuyari Zukin, the *traitor*—I was wondering if Emoto-san and Rurero-san, in the same way, had been purged by those two; well, I was somewhat worried.

For now, the two of them seemed to be fine.

"So-sorry... So-sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry."

Emoto-san...

She was holding her body with both arms, but still being unable to restrain herself, she was frantically trembling and mechanically putting words together with her bloodshot eyes open.

"I, I am sorry—I, I am sorry! A-asking for forgiveness would be too impudent, right, I can't possibly ask that. F-for me, I, Ikkun is an important, friend, but, Ikkun, surely won't be able to forgive me, won't forgive me, he is thinking of using this as an opportunity to sever his ties with me, that must be true, it, it's obvious that in reality he didn't think of me as a friend from the start so I was just used as he pleased I was just used as he pleased, h-how, didn't I notice that sooner, wasn't that the case since the start, how many times do I need to repeat the same thing before being satisfied, how many times do I need to be fooled... Uh, it-it's wrong! It-it's not like I didn't believe in Ikkun, I believe you, I believe you, b-but, this is my problem, I-I am—"

"..."

Alright.

As usual.

Looking to the side, I saw Hitoshiki looking seriously creeped out. He stayed on his toes to be able to run off at any moment. Umm, I didn't think that was the case, but maybe Zerozaki wasn't too into girls?

"Doctor. You need to calm down." Rurero-san, unable to watch, put her hand on Emoto-san's shoulder. "It's fine, it's fine. Everyone loves you."

"D-don't touch me!"

Emoto-san shook off Rurero-san.

"E-even Rurero-san, I'm sure you only think of me as someone who will heal your injuries!"

"...No, well, I mean... You're a doctor."

Rurero-san wore a forced smile.

...Somehow, they made for a surprisingly good team.

Emoto-san said she liked Rurero-san too; a friendship may have been born in the last month.

"Ah... I-I said some weird things again. So—sorry. Ikkun, and Rurero-san... Be-because of my personality..." Emoto-san said apologetically. "Be-because I was, long ago, a bully..."

"Haah... I see."

...Wait, hey!

So you were a bully?

"I, I hated being bullied, so when I bullied them before they could, I was afraid of the payback, so I continued without limits... Even though my heart hurt, even though I didn't like it and knew those were bad things, I couldn't stop the bullying..."

"..."

That was the first time I'd heard that kind of story.

What an unpleasant spiral...

A story I didn't want to dive deeper into.

"Well, more importantly."

Setting aside Emoto-san, who was still spouting things, Rurero-san passed Zerozaki and me with unreliable footwork, and headed towards the scene of the apartment's destruction. Suddenly realizing something, Emoto-san followed after her.

What is it...?

Did they come to see the apartment?

I thought they came to see me, but...

"Hey, oi."

Zerozaki said.

"...So that's *Emoto-san*?"

"Yes. Raincoat and long boots."

"And, next to her is Rurero-san, huh..."

"Exactly."

"Hey, defective product."

"What is it, human failure?"

"Even if we're far apart, I'm always supporting you."

"You can't go home yet."

I grabbed Zerozaki, who tried to run away, by the arm and dragged him towards Emoto-san and Rurero-san. The two of them were, as expected, gazing from a distance at the destroyed, demolished rundown apartment that had turned into a mountain of debris.

"That's...no good."

"Yes. No good."

"I'm beat."

"What should we do..."

"It would have been for the best if we made it in time, though—"

"Even if we made it...there was nothing we could have done."

"If I was there, maybe there could have been something I could've done. Well...even that wish was faint though..."

"Umm..."

Those two were having a conversation like that.

I didn't understand what they meant, but are they talking about Magokoro? Right. Then I—I had something I must ask Rurero-san.

I inserted myself between those two and the mountain

of debris.

"Um...Rurero-san."

"It's my bad."

Rurero-san said, before I could say anything.

"I can't really say that it's my responsibility, but—well, even then, there's no doubt I was an *accomplice*—"

"Then—did you really?"

"Yeah."

Rurero-san nodded.

"I underestimated him—Tokinomiya Jikoku."

"..."

"**That person—he put a double Thought Manipulation on Magokoro. One that would be put into action—when mine and Raichi's *spells* would be released.**"

"...!"

What was referred to in the field of hypnotism as—posthypnotic suggestion.

No, however—however, even then.

Even then, it shouldn't have swayed things this much. Be it posthypnotic suggestions or whatever... I mean, Tokinomiya Jikoku's *techniques* were similar to Rurero-san's *skill* in the sense that, without direct contact with the target, over a long time, the effectiveness would eventually fade out—since Nanananami was guarding her, there was no way Tokinomiya Jikoku could have made contact with Magokoro in the past twenty days.

"Rurero-san... What do you mean?"

"Aah. That's—"

"Ah. Ikkun. You are injured."

As if interrupting Rurero-san's line, Emoto-san leaned forward and swiftly raised my hands. But...they were

certainly drenched in blood because of when I tried to dig up the debris, but why did she even care in this situation...

"Aah...you got stabbed by glass. We need to treat it quickly or it'll become dangerous. I have a medkit inside the car, so wait a little, Ikkun."

"No, Emoto-san, it's not the time—"

I didn't only want to ask about Magokoro, but also about the Miotsukushi Sisters and Ichirizuka Konomi—I must also ask why Zukin-chan had to be killed. However Emoto-san,

"There is nothing more important than treatment."

Affirmed strongly.

I glanced at Rurero-san in search of help, but she just stated "...No, it's fine." in a fed up tone.

"At any rate, this place—it's not really suited to talk."

Paying more attention,

The number of onlookers began to increase again.

It was beginning to approach the commute time.

Although no one could understand what happened, well, the situation should still catch their eyes. This location being complicated to reach, I didn't think a big crowd would form—however, Emoto-san and Rurero-san stood out too much. Furthermore, both of them were beautiful girls... Also, since there was a boy wearing a military uniform and bearing a face tattoo, it made it look like I was a cosplayer as well.

It might've been for the best to change our location...

"It'll probably be quite an elaborate talk. Also—"

Rurero-san said.

"We also have something to ask of *Ii-chan*—**the person in the back seat must think so too**."

Back...seat.

Didn't only two people come?

Was there still one more person?

My consciousness suddenly started to rustle.

Impossible...

Now, in this situation, those two—The *Doctor*, Emoto Sonoki and the *Puppeteer*, Migishita Rurero, **the only person that could be accompanying them**...

Speaking of people that could move with them among the *Thirteen Stairs*.

"...!"

I released Zerozaki's arm—

And rushed down the way I'd just come.

Breaking the corner,

Arriving at the white Mercedes Benz still parked on the sidewalk.

Then—

Pulling the back seat door with all my force.

It wasn't locked.

The door opened disappointingly easily,

Inside it,

"Kukukuh—"

Laughing lightly,

That individual leisurely revealed himself.

"Yo—my enemy."

Needless to say, it was the fox-masked man.

A white kimono...and a fox mask.

Tall—as if looking down on me.

He would never see me again—

He would never show up in front of me anymore.

The man that should have promised that...

Was now in front of my eyes.

And,

That wasn't all.

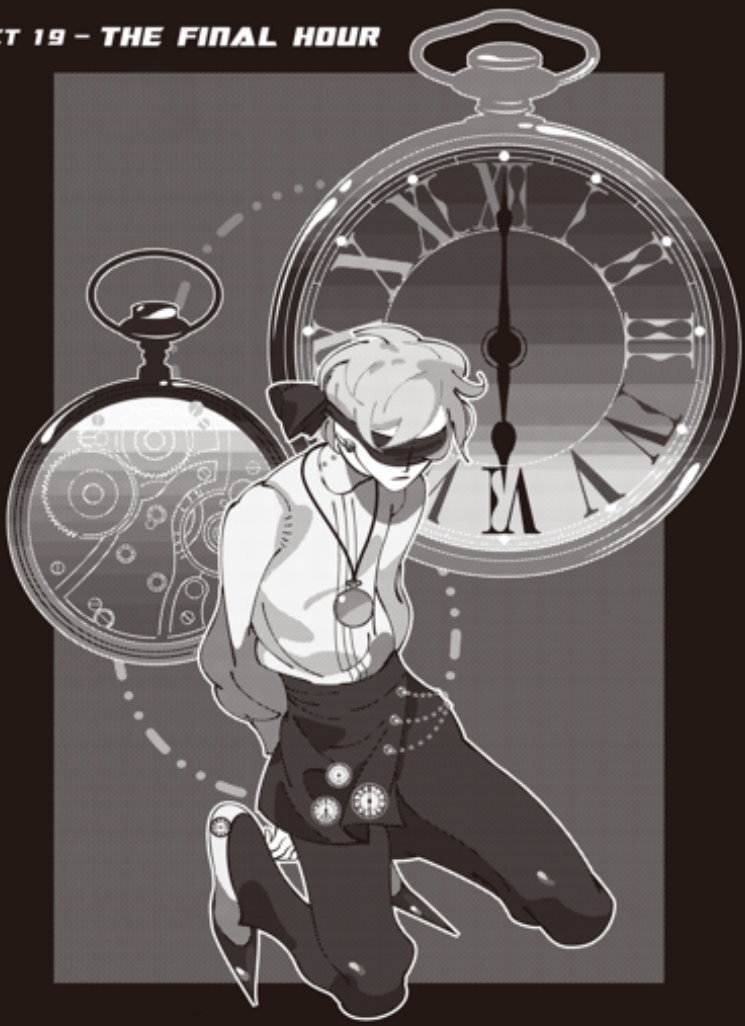
One more person—

The person who got out of the car following the fox-masked man.

The sight was red, one that I hadn’t seen in a month.

Aikawa Jun.

ACT 19 – THE FINAL HOUR



TOKINOMIYA JIKOKU

THOUGHT MANIPULATOR

0

What you are searching for is nowhere.

1

Rather than bizarre, it was queer.
Rather than unnatural, supernatural.

Changing our location—
Changing the scene to Assistant Professor Kigamine's research facility.
The former Saitou Clinic.
The tatami floored—waiting room.
Surrounding the wooden tea table—six people.
Saitou Takashi.
Aikawa Jun.
Emoto Sonoki.
Migishita Rurero.
Zerozaki Hitoshiki.
And me.
The fox-masked man, the contractor, the doctor, the puppeteer, demonic killer—
And the Nonsense User.
Considering the relationships between those six, a situation in which all of them could drink tea around a table should have been impossible, no matter how much you thought about it.
First, Saitou Takashi and Aikawa Jun—parent-in-law and biological parent, they'd killed each other ten years

ago from Aikawa-san's perspective; and, he was also the person that she'd always been searching for.

And I was, from Saitou Takashi, from the fox-masked man's perspective, his enemy. At the same time, I had known Aikawa-san for about six months, so, well, in this case, saying I was someone on Aikawa-san's side wasn't necessarily wrong.

Next, when talking about Emoto-san, her situation wasn't normal either. Emoto-san had already betrayed the *Thirteen Stairs* of her own will, cooperated with me and, if I were to put it maliciously, sold out her brethren Migishita Rurero to me—that was her track record.

And, for the one *sold out*, Migishita Rurero, if you thought about it, Rurero-san had also betrayed the *Thirteen Stairs*. If you asked why, it was because the leader of the *Thirteen Stairs*, Saitou Takashi, had directly ordered her that 'If you're told anything by him, don't go against him and betray me.' In other words, the betrayal was not from her own will. Not from her will, but even then, she was still a traitor on the same level as Emoto-san.

The sight of those two, Emoto-san and Rurero-san, sitting next to each other was, to me, as eerie as the sight of Saitou Takashi and Aikawa-san sitting next to each other.

Both traitors—

And with both of them, I was involved.

Although I let them decide of their will, I was not unconcerned.

And the last one, Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Since he was a character that had only appeared yesterday, he was not connected to the other five at all, someone without context—but not really, as Zerozaki Hitoshiki was

originally the one Saitou Takashi wanted to *make his enemy,* and in the first place, I was Zerozaki Hitoshiki's alternative. He seemed to have somewhat of a relationship with the former *Thirteen Stair*, Niounomiya Izumu, and most importantly, the presumed culprit of his hypothetical death—Aikawa Jun. Since Zerozaki was alive, we knew that was demagoguery, but it was now common knowledge that Aikawa Jun and Zerozaki Hitoshiki had fought. That event—especially the second occurrence, was still shrouded in mystery.

Therefore—

Rather than bizarre, it was queer.

Rather than unnatural, supernatural.

There was a relationship.

Between the six people here, there were multiple non-severable and non-snappable connections that could not be untied. Conversely, for all of us to be gathered like this—you could say that it was inevitable. As if this situation came to be by all means possible.

But.

Then—**one more person** was missing, was lacking from here—I should say.

Someone whose presence here should've been appropriate.

With her orange hair,

The Orange Seed—Omokage Magokoro.

Magokoro should've been here.

"Kukukuh—"

The one who fired the first shot was,

As expected, the fox-masked man.

"—Well, although there are still too many missing people to say that every actor is present... At any rate, this

is a rather interesting combination."

Seemingly thinking the same thing as I, the fox-masked man looked over at the five other people pleasantly as he said that line.

Emoto-san and Rurero-san were his *former* subordinates—well, in the case of Rurero-san, she still thought of herself as one, but for now, that's how it was—therefore, the fox-masked man's words felt oppressive. Setting Rurero-san aside, for Emoto-san, it would be more precise to say she was trembling in fear.

But,

Somehow, the more difficult to handle ones were the other two.

For a while, Aikawa-san had been making a very displeased face. Her atmosphere made me refrain from calling out to her. Although we hadn't met in a month, I couldn't even greet her.

It was the same for Zerozaki too, though in his own way—I didn't know what he thought about this situation. The only thing certain was that he persisted in ignoring Emoto-san and Rurero-san. It seemed he occasionally glanced towards Aikawa-san and the fox-masked man, but even then, he basically just sat next to me as if he didn't have a place here. Maybe he felt awkward or that it didn't concern him. There was no telling just from looking at his profile.

By the way,

This is a very important fact. Emoto-san changed from her raincoat to a white blouse over a swimsuit. It seemed to be a rule for her to wear raincoats while outside and swimsuits while inside.

Today was a white bikini.

No one dared to retort about that, but...

"Um..."

We wouldn't go anywhere if no one ever talked, so I spoke to the fox-masked man after raising my hand.

"For starters—it's been a while, Mr. Fox."

"'It's been a while, Mr. Fox'. Hm. Aah, well, yeah. It has certainly been a long time."

The fox-masked man acquiesced.

"Hm—sorry about that. Although I said I wouldn't ever meet you again, sorry for having to show my face again."

"No—I always thought we'd have to meet again anyway... Though it would have been for the best if we didn't. For both of us."

"'For both of us'. Hm. Absolutely."

The fox-masked man sighed.

"So—the one over there is, right...Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Mm, no, since the Zerozaki Clan has been annihilated, shall I call you Migiwame Toshiki?"

"It's Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

Zerozaki answered bluntly.

"I no longer have any other names."

"'I no longer have any other names'. Hm. I see—is that so, is that so, I see, so that is how it is. That is how you see it. Deeply interesting. However, I heard that you had died —"

"Ask this Onee-chan that. Cause I'm not involved in all that."

Zerozaki pointed towards Aikawa-san.

Aikawa-san said,

"Aahn?"

And faced Zerozaki.

She was really displeased.

"No idea. Why should I care? I just happened to fail at killing you, didn't I? Don't get conceited and start pointing at me, you hack. I swear—didn't I tell you to never show up in front of me again, Zerozaki-kun?"

"In this case, it's outside my jurisdiction. What else could it be? I should be the uncaring one here. That being said, I always thought I'd meet you again, though. Tall women like you are really to my liking."

"Oh great. I also really like short, lovely men like you. Go dye your hair black, wear a skirt and confess to me. I'll think about it for ten seconds."

"Hah. What a masterpiece."

Zerozaki said and nonchalantly looked at the ceiling.

...I was nervous about whether those two would have a rematch here, but it didn't seem like that kind of atmosphere, so I calmed down.

That being said, Aikawa-san...

It didn't really seem like her body was in bad condition or her mind was disturbed. If I talked to her, she would normally—like the Aikawa-san I knew, like the usual Aikawa Jun—answer me. Until now, I'd been worried on the inside about the small probably of the same thing Magokoro suffered having been done on her, where she would turn into Saitou Takashi's puppet, but—

Or rather, then.

Why was she so displeased?

My eyes met Aikawa-san's.

Aikawa-san—

"...Ah, no, sorry."

Scratched her head awkwardly towards me.

Different from usual—

But in the same way as usual.

"It seems—I've made you unnecessarily worried, Ii-tan."

"Eh, ah, that's not much of a problem, but—"

"Don't mind it. I just didn't have leeway. My head was just full. Nothing's been done to me—" said Aikawa-san. She then glanced sideways at the fox-masked man. "—It's just that, with a guy like that next to me, I can't drop my guard."

"...Is that so."

A guy like that.

...Father.

I wonder—in this past month,

Between these two, what kind of conversations took place? I had no way to know. There was no way I could know that. As if I would know—it was a conversation between Humanity's Strongest and Humanity's Worst.

Even then, well...

If Aikawa-san was fine, I guess there was no problem.

I'd ask about that later.

More importantly, for now—

"Then..."

The fox-masked man.

"What should we talk about first, my enemy? Both of us have a mountain of things to say and to ask, things we need to say and ask. However, there is only one thing we should be thinking about now—how about it?"

"...Maybe."

What I wanted to ask—

Between Aikawa-san and the Miotsukushi Sisters, there was quite a lot. There was too much, so much that I couldn't grasp all of it in my head.

However,

Even then, what I should've been thinking about for now.

"About Magokoro, Mr. Fox."

I said.

"**What happened—to Magokoro**."

"..."

"According to what I heard from Rurero-san the other day...the *chains* cast on her would not remain forever and their efficiency would fade with time."

"So it seems. Though I didn't know."

"...But earlier, I heard that Tokinomiya Jikoku had cast a double *technique*, and that it'd just been activated now."

"So it seems. Though that too, I didn't know."

"There are two issues."

I said.

"Firstly—what kind of *technique* was it exactly? Secondly—how did Tokinomiya Jikoku cast that *technique* on Magokoro—I absolutely need an answer for that second one."

"How sharp, as usual. You excel in summarizing things. Kukukuh," the fox-masked man laughed. "However, I cannot give an answer to both of them because I simply do not know."

"..."

This person knew nothing, huh...

I turned towards Aikawa-san.

Aikawa-san shook her head as if saying she couldn't handle him.

"Ii-tan."

Then, she called out to me.

"Don't expect anything from **this**. **This thing** doesn't possess any answer Ii-tan wishes for. He's the kind of guy

who, despite knowing nothing, while knowing nothing, ruins everything."

"Yes...I understood that just now."

"I also finally got it recently...but this guy really doesn't know anything. Honestly, I feel like I've wasted an absurd amount of time by searching for someone like this."

"..."

"I swear...why is this thing my father? It's a real pain, a bother, it makes me feel sick..."

Then Aikawa-san once again went silent, wearing an irritated face. ...Somehow, looking at Aikawa-san, her attitude might fit in the category of *being embarrassed to have your embarrassing dad being seen*, I thought. How should I put it, like an elementary schooler on Sunday parent's day.

Though, it's not like they broke the ice.

At the very least,

In this moment, only speaking about this instant,

Aikawa-san had no bloodlust.

I didn't know the reasoning behind it, but...

She didn't seem to want to kill her dad.

...However, speaking of that father.

As usual, I couldn't read him.

Was he thinking of his daughter...as his daughter?

This man, who didn't think of people as people.

"Hm."

The fox-masked man said plainly.

"Well, I may certainly know nothing, but—I have *limbs* for this kind of situation. Hey, isn't that right, Doctor, Rurero."

"Yeah."

The one who raised her voice was Rurero-san.

"I still don't know for sure, but—I have a grasp on what's happened in general."

Those were strong words.

Competent underlings for an incompetent leader.

Guaah, from the side I heard a yawn.

It was Zerozaki.

"Hey, Ii-tan."

"Don't you call me Ii-tan. What is it?"

"I'm sleepy, so can I sleep? Honestly, it seems like a story that doesn't really concern me is about to start."

"..."

I thought "What does he think he's saying in such a tense situation", but he really did seem sleepy. Zerozaki's eyes were drowsy. Thinking about it, he had to pull through an all nighter starting yesterday—it might have been his thoughtfulness to consider this a situation where he couldn't sleep brazenly in front of everybody.

"...There are beds on the second floor."

Emoto-san was the one to say it.

"Err...the bed on one side is still used by Rurero-san so use the other one. The one in the back after climbing the stairs."

"...Sankyuu."

Saying that, Zerozaki stood up. Although those were words of gratitude, you could still feel Zerozaki's caution against Emoto-san. He was somehow able to raise his hips.

"You know where the stairs are?"

"I can find something like that in the blink of an eye—despite looking like this, my sense of direction and observational skills are quite high. On that note, see ya."

Zerozaki hurriedly passed behind Emoto-san and Rurero-san's back and turned towards the sliding screen. Then, when he was about to grab that screen,

"Aah, right, right."

He—

Called out to the fox-masked man.

"Hey, you."

"...What is it, Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

The fox-masked man answered without turning back.

However, the tone of his voice—it felt differently than normal.

"It's something I don't really care about, and I wouldn't want people to think I was curious about it if I asked, but even then, I'll ask, just in case. Were you the one behind the Zerozaki Clan's annihilation?"

"..."

The fox-masked man didn't say anything for a while,

"Well, you are right."

He said.

“To be precise, it wasn't me, but Omokage Magokoro, though."

"...Hmm."

"They were perfect opponents to test her strength on, you see—after all, once you kill one, they show up one after the other. It was easy to keep it a secret."

"Is that so."

Zerozaki said.

He then stepped over the doorstep and took a step in the exterior of the room.

"...Don't you have any hatred? Towards me, who killed your family."

"Not really. Not like I thought of those guys as family."

"Even then, you still name yourself Zerozaki."

"The kanji are cool. I took a liking to it somehow. That's all. There's nothing else. Aah, also, Humanity's Strongest."

"Aahn?"

Being called,

Aikawa-san turned back and looked at Zerozaki.

Zerozaki,

"The promise I made, I kept it."

He said.

"At least till now. But **she probably did too**."

"..."

"I have no guarantee, but I intend to continue keeping it. And she too, probably."

Aikawa-san looked curiously at Zerozaki for a while.

"I see."

She nodded.

"Thanks for your hard work."

"...Not at all. Don't concern yourself."

Then Zerozaki closed the screen.

Eventually, we heard feet climbing the stairs.

"..."

It was only a ten second conversation, but in this conversation between a demonic killer, Humanity's Worst, and Humanity's Strongest, it had too many components for me to grasp.

Only consisting of things I didn't understand.

Even then—

I at least understood that Magokoro was the one who annihilated the Zerozaki Clan. There was no denying it. Kouta-san didn't say a word about it, but—well, she probably knew. Though I couldn't decide whether the

decision to not tell me was out of kindness or malice.

I had faintly sensed it.

I had heavily tried to deny it.

"Hm—I see, so that kind of personality. That kind of personality, huh. The Zerozaki Clan's annihilation was mainly to test out Magokoro's strength, but I also thought it might bring out the potentially alive Zerozaki Hitoshiki—but with him being like that, I guess it was impossible."

"Mr. Fox... Did you think—that Zerozaki might have been alive?"

"No, I concluded he was dead. In the end, it was just in case. You need to try things out. But having seen him directly—I see, that guy must have had a direct connection with Izumu... However, that is somewhat faint for having a connection with me.

Now, the fox-masked man said.

"I wonder what kind of connection ties him to me—since I remembered nothing having seen his face, there is a strong possibility for someone to be between us... Hm. It would be interesting if it were Hagihara Shiogi—but I shouldn't expect that. It would be too good to be true. Since I am not connected to Hagihara Shiogi... Hm. Then who could it be..."

Like Aikawa-san and Magokoro being between the fox-masked man and me, there was someone between the fox-masked man and Zerozaki—even if that were the case, there would probably be no way to know that at this point—but even then, I was curious.

When we were on this digression,

"Umm."

To my surprise, it was Emoto-san who sent us back on track.

"Rurero-san... Still, has not completely recovered—so when this conversation ends, she will need to rest again...so end, the conversation, quickly."

"As usual, you only have eyes for injured and ill people, Doctor. It's even refreshing. Fine—I shall think about Zerozaki at a later date. Rurero, continue—actually, I want to know too."

"Yeah. Got it—you should also listen in, okay, Aikawa-san?"

"I know. It's not like I was considering whether I should hit the bed too."

Looks like she was.

You can't let your guard down with her.

Rurero-san sighed—

And turned to me.

"In the first place, the trigger was—"

2

That was the first trigger, the first doubt Rurero-san held. One so faint you could easily miss it—it seems.

A little while after entering contact with me on the fifteenth of October—when her body had recovered enough to be freed of complete reliance on Emoto-san for most of her actions—

She apparently had a brief doubt.

"Is that really—all?"

She thought, disappointed.

I had also thought that—during these two weeks, it has been a thought constantly on my mind. Not only about the way the war with the fox-masked man ended, but also the fact that Magokoro's *chains* could be lifted by simply waiting—although it took effort to cast it, how could lifting it be so effortless—I had thought that, unsatisfied.

But I accepted that disappointment.

I thought, "That's just how it is.".

That is how society is.

That is how the world is.

That is how, in most cases, the Story is.

However—Rurero-san didn't accept that. This was not the first case of the fox-masked man's whimsicalness. That must have been clear to Rurero-san even before entering the *Thirteen Stairs*, and even setting aside the fox-masked man's, Saitou Takashi's, declaration of war to me—

The Orange Seed.

There was a problem for—Omokage Magokoro.

Kino Raichi.

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Even though herself and two *Cursing Names* were involved—wasn't the conclusion too abrupt?

That's what she thought.

No, it wasn't really strange. This case wasn't special, it had always been this way—whether it be the nature of Kino-san's *poison*, the fact that Thought Manipulation lost effectiveness over time, or the condition that her own *training* had no meaning if she didn't constantly apply it—those were the normal, natural rules. It was natural like that.

That's why—it was unnatural.

Just because, until then, the conditions hadn't been met—there were no doubts or errors—that it was just because Magokoro, who **just happened to be** the target for those chains, escaped.

However,

When she thought that—

When she began to think that, an unnatural feeling must have come to her.

"...When Magokoro escaped from your surveillance—by chance, Tokinomiya Jikoku was absent—that's the fact in question, right?"

After I said that in anticipation,

"Exactly."

Rurero-san agreed.

Of course, it's not like this kind of opportunity wasn't present before—one of those three must have left at some point. Therefore, thinking that Magokoro aimed for a moment where someone was absent to escape would be a normal way of thinking, and thinking that Tokinomiya jikoku's will was at work was unreasonable.

However,

It was that line of reasoning that Rurero-san doubted.

On top of doubting, she remembered.

No, in this case, saying that she doubted because **that** had left a strong impression would be more accurate.

That is—

When he was in front of Kino-san and Rurero-san—just after casting the third *chain* on Magokoro—what Tokinomiya Jikoku said.

'As an experiment, I want to inquire something to you two—'

Right, Tokinomiya Jikoku started like that.

In a way indistinguishable from usual.

'How exactly would you describe **that**?'

'Isn't that obvious—' Kino-san answered. 'That is the so-called *Humanity's Last*—the ultimate form of humanity, right? One that could win over that Contractor, *Humanity's Strongest*, as an existence—even outdoing Mr. Fox, *Humanity's Worst*—right?'

'Exactly. Exactly exact, right on point. Completely exact. If you swallow Mr. Fox's explanation without any questions, that is correct. However—I wonder, what do you think? If, hypothetically, that Orange Seed were to be something of that kind—do you not think that would already be a form of *the world's end*?'

'...'

'...'

Without caring about Kino-san and Rurero-san's silence, Tokinomiya Jikoku seamlessly continued.

'In the first place—The Orange Seed was designed in the enormous, integrated, and united research facility to be Overkill Red's successor. So if Overkill Red—Death

Colored Crimson, was a failed attempt from Mr. Fox to achieve his objective, *the world's end*—then wouldn't the successful product, The Orange Seed, already be *the end of the world* by her existence alone?'

Magokoro is—the world's end.

That is—

Certainly, I hadn't thought about it, but you couldn't simply dismiss it as a farfetched argument.

'But even then, Mr. Fox only uses The Orange Seed as an opponent for *Ii-chan*, as a foil—he even uses us three to *chain* her, overlapping restrictions upon restrictions. How do you feel about this fact?'

Depending on the time, place and situation, it would have been a somewhat respectable opinion—however, even if that expression was a little misplaced for Kino-kun and Rurero-san, they basically idolized the fox-masked man, they were on the side of the *Thirteen Stairs* that agreed with his views—

Tokinomiya's words ended after a smile.

Tokinomiya Jikoku didn't put that much importance into what he had told these two. Far from that, he acted as if that was merely the preamble—

'Right.'

Then, he brought up the next topic, apparently.

'Raichi-kun. You just called The Orange Seed the ultimate form of humanity, but I wonder about that. Is that really it? In the first place, is there really an ultimate form of what we call a human and recognize as one?'

'Is that it, you say—she's right before your eyes, so I guess you have to accept it,' Kino-san answered. 'To begin with, we were only just able to seal her power with all three of us working together, weren't we? Don't tell me

you've has forgotten that enormous power, Tokinomiya-san—'

'Her stamina sapped with Raichi-san's *poison*. Her body bound with Rurero-san's *training*. And her mind controlled with my *Thought Manipulation*—each of us restrained her. ...However, is that really all it takes? Something that can be restrained with **just us three banding together**—is it really fine to call that Humanity's Last? That is what I think. That is how I approached it.'

Hearing the word "just", Kino-san went pale—and it apparently wasn't a pleasant opinion for Rurero-san either.

Don't misunderstand me, Tokinomiya Jikoku continued.

It seems.

'I just want to say that—**in reality, The Orange Seed** is on a much higher level.'

'On a much higher...level?'

'In a whole other dimension, would probably be more correct—that violence, which was already overwhelming for us—without even having to use the wounds Rurero-san received as proof, even that overwhelming power—what if that was something already restricted beforehand by The Orange Seed herself?'

'Restri—cted?'

'By chains.'

Tokinomiya Jikoku said.

'There is a possibility The Orange Seed is unconsciously suppressing herself.'

'...'

'Of course, she is also doing it consciously...but it's probably a problem related to the personality installed in

her. The one who *unlocked* The Orange Seed is our current enemy. *Ii-chan*, isn't it? Then—I would deduce he exerts some kind of influence there. Deeply interesting—the personality *Ii-chan* bestowed to the Orange Seed.'

'However—mister,' unable to put up with this any longer, Rurero-san said, 'isn't there no way to verify whether the Orange Seed is unconsciously restraining herself? It could go both ways—'

'As you know, I am someone who manipulates minds, so I can deduce that much—well, I think I can do it with more precision than you two, at least. Naturally, I cannot deny that *the world's end* could be brought about by a mere powered up version of Humanity's Strongest over a few patterns, I cannot deny that. I would not be committed enough to affirm it, but I cannot deny it either.'

'...What do you want to say?'

To Kino-san's question—

Tokinomiya Jikoku smiled, delighted.

As if he was waiting for that question wholeheartedly.

'Why, I just thought that would be pitiful. If the existence called the Orange Seed, Humanity's Last, humanity's ultimate form—is not able to achieve her goal, to do what she wants, because of her timid and fragile personality—

If she is afraid of something.

That would be too pitiful.'

'...'

'...'

In front of those speechless two—

Tokinomiya shrugged his shoulders jokingly.

'Setting that aside—you two want to see it too, right?

What Mr. Fox calls *the world's end*. So then you must understand, the idea of having that very thing be right in front of me and not thinking about it—is not something I can do. I cannot do it. As a member of the *Thirteen Stairs*, and as *Tokinomiya Jikoku*—you see.'

Tokinomiya Jikoku.

When talking about his affiliation, he apparently had the habit of not just cutting it to *Tokinomiya*, but saying the full name—*Tokinomiya Jikoku*.

The name bestowed upon an exiled one.

"...Anyway."

Rurero-san said.

She thought of it as gossip—also, this conversation took place only a short while after she had met Kino-kun and Tokinomiya Jikoku, so Rurero-san only thought that he "seems like a weird person," and brushed it aside—

But now that it came to it,

Now that the situation came to this state—it was fishy.

Suspicious.

And it being just after having casted his *technique* for the first time—that fact also felt strange.

However, after the declaration of war was announced and the *Thirteen Stairs* got scattered, meaning that they had no means to contact each other, she wasn't able to question Tokinomiya Jikoku—therefore, during the past week, Rurero-san had been constantly carrying these doubts.

However—

Even then, no matter what Tokinomiya Jikoku did to Magokoro—no matter what kind of *Thought Manipulation* he used behind Kino-san and Rurero-san's back—if those *techniques* were not regularly cast, they would naturally

weather away. No matter how strong or persistent the technique was, that was an absolute. In the first place, the concept of manipulating minds—which is called *Thought Manipulation*—is established upon these rules.

Not a weak point but a foundation.

That was why it should have been safe.

Right, that's why she told herself that—and it seemed that her act of self persuasion was successful, which led to her in the end not transmitting her doubts to Emoto-san.

But—just yesterday.

The thirty-first of October.

There was a message from the *Thirteen Stairs*' Ichirizuka Konomi to this very former Saitou Clinic—Assistant Professor Kigamine's research facility.

In short,

I managed to catch wind of Tokinomiya Jikoku's plan.
He escaped in the middle of the conversation—
But we must obstruct his plan.
Using the Miotsukushi Sisters.
You two—will assure Mr. Fox's safety—
And investigate the state of Omokage Magokoro—

"Hurry up. You already might not make it in time—those were Konomi's words."

"I see."

The one who nodded the most was the fox-masked man. I couldn't see with his mask, but it felt like he was smiling underneath.

"So, Konomi grasped something. As per usual, even when I don't ask for anything, she's a restless and cute fellow. She reminds me of the hamster I kept as a child. Although I didn't give it a name. Right, let's name that

hamster Konomi-chan. Good grief, at this rate, maybe I should have entrusted the surveillance/investigation of my enemy to Konomi instead of Nureginu... So, Rurero. What did Konomi tell you?"

"I don't know the details, but-"

"Even then, Konomi must have grasped something sufficient to make you, who was still uncertain, move. Explain. Even I am confused, you know—deranging our special parent and daughter meeting like that. How boorish. Right, Jun?"

"Don't call me by my first name."

"But the people who call you by your last name are enemies, right?"

"In your case, no matter what you call me, you're an enemy."

Aikawa-san suddenly turned sideways.

Somehow, they seemed to get along—parent and daughter meeting... What exactly had those two been doing and where? Believing the fox-masked man's words, there was no doubt they weren't in Kyoto...

In other words, having received the message from Ichirizuka Konomi, Rurero-san and Emoto-san first went to protect the fox-masked man—and they also took Aikawa-san, who was there as well, along too—then they came to search for Magokoro at the rundown apartment. After all, it was already evident to the *Thirteen Stairs* that Magokoro was living in that apartment.

That meant, if Rurero-san and Emoto-san headed towards the apartment before taking the fox-masked man —which would've been understandable since it should have been the shortest route, distance wise—the apartment's destruction may have been avoided.

However, that was the order of priority among the *Thirteen Stairs*, so it couldn't be helped.

However...

Speaking of yesterday, it was also the day when I was about to get killed by the Miotsukushi Sisters and Ichirizuka Konomi—if it weren't for the now asleep Zerozaki, I would have certainly lost my life.

Without being able to part with Kunagisa.

I should have been dead.

I wonder, time-wise, which happened first, between that and Rurero-san being contacted? Thinking about how Ichirizuka Konomi's personality seemed according to Izumu-kun—hmm. At the very least, from seeing their reactions up until now, it seemed that neither Rurero-san, Emoto-san nor the fox-masked man knew that I was on the verge of getting killed last night by the Miotsukushi Sisters and Ichirizuka Konomi...

That being said, it was difficult to say that in the current mood...

They would think I was a guy with no cooperativeness.

"Protecting me—since that's what Konomi said, we can at least assume that something capable of harming me has appeared—but still, what in the world has Jikoku done? There's no way to progress without understanding that."

"I do not know how to describe that action. I don't know how to say it. But there's no doubt that it was an act of disloyalty towards Mr. Fox—"

"It was not infidelity, nor betrayal," the fox-masked man said. "After all, I only managed to make him enter the *Thirteen Stairs* under the condition of *allowing various liberties*. Even actions that would normally be considered

betrayal were included in the contract."

"...Aah, is that so."

Rurero-san looked fed up with the fox-masked man, but as expected of someone used to his behavior, she just continued talking.

"Tokinomiya—

“Planned Magokoro-chan's release.

“Not her restraint—her release."

"..."

Magokoro's—release.

Setting Magokoro free.

One of the three chains cast on the Orange Seed, composing the refined *Thought Manipulation*, Tokinomiya Jikoku—on his own, wished for the Orange Seed's release?

However, even if we're talking about release.

There were too many meanings to that.

An uncountable amount.

"For a man who manipulates minds, that kind of method is more plausible. Rather than **not letting it act as it wants—letting it act as it wants**—is probably much easier."

"And that end result...was a rampage?"

I muttered.

Not restraint, but release.

Not a rampage, but release.

Let's say that, as I was told in front of the collapsed apartment earlier—a posthypnotic suggestion was cast on Magokoro so that it would activate when Kino-san's *poison* and Rurero-san's *technique* completely faded away —

Then.

As Tokinomiya Jikoku told Kino-san and Rurero-san, if Magokoro was suppressing herself unconsciously as Humanity's Last—

Rampage.

Release.

One's desire.

Was that—

Was that what Magokoro wanted to do?

Was...that Magokoro's desire?

Then—

"..."

I...

We.

How many feelings—

Were we able to save in Magokoro?

How much self-control did we force on Magokoro?

I said things like "I will set you free"—but what I did was no different from what Kino-san, Rurero-san, or the fox-masked man—or that ER3 System's MS-2 did—that's what it is.

The result—an uncontrollable recoil.

The result.

Involving everybody...

And—

Magokoro even escaped from me.

She...went somewhere.

But...

Even though it looked like she was having so much fun.

"Hm."

The fox-masked man said.

"However, I can't understand it. How did Jikoku use his Thought Manipulation on Magokoro? He shouldn't have had a chance to make contact with Magokoro ever since the tenth of October."

"Exactly."

"Even with something like a posthypnotic suggestion—the underlying problem remains. Or perhaps—that Jikoku, did he sneak into my enemy's apartment? And he was caught by Konomi there—"

"That is impossible."

I asserted.

"Outside contact is impossible for that apartment. If I can add to that, there was also the Kunagisa Syndicate's guard—"

"Hm. It's quite interesting that you consider the Kunagisa Syndicate's guard as a side point. It sounds like a joke. It sounds like a nightmare. However, then—what does this mean, Rurero?"

"The answer is simple and clear—even I, when I first heard it from Konomi, was caught off guard," Rurero-san said in a low voice. "**If you have to continue applying the hypnosis to not let the effectiveness fade—just continue applying it**. Just that simple logic."

Hearing Rurero-san's words—

Everyone was left speechless.

No, rather than speechless—we just didn't understand what she meant. Of course we didn't, because that argument had no meaning topologically. It's the same as saying "if you don't have food, why not just eat food?" Like answering "you should just fly in the sky" when someone asks how to fly in the sky. No reasonable answer

can be found there.

"Wha-what does this mean, Rurero-san..."

Emoto-san asked.

...You don't know either?

Setting the fox-masked man aside, I assumed that at least Emoto-san had heard beforehand...but maybe Rurero-san didn't know what to say. Even now, it seemed like she was thinking while talking—also, realizing that her current words were lacking, "Uum," she closed her eyes for a bit.

"In other words—hypnosis is, errr, in short, something like controlling the mind's rhythm—well, although hypnosis and Thought Manipulation are similar, they are still their own thing—look, isn't there one, when you become gradually sleepier."

"...The one where you swing a five yen coin in front of your eyes?"

"Right right. 'You become more and more sleepy'."

"Hm. Hallucination by sensory deprivation," the fox-masked man said. "Numbing the mind with monotone movement, that kind of hypnosis. Well, that's a foundation even for the *Tokinomiya*'s Thought Manipulation techniques. However, what about that?"

"So—you need to match the consciousness level to that hypnotism's rhythm—you need to fix it in place. That's what it is."

Rurero-san said meekly.

"If you constantly fixate Magokoro-chan's consciousness on **something**, **the first Thought Manipulation he cast would not be released**."

Rhythm—

The Thought Manipulation's beat?

I see, even if the caster themself wasn't always nearby, if you set it so that her mind was always responding to the rhythm of something, then...there was no need to cast the technique over and over...?

No, that would still have the same root problem as the posthypnotic suggestion.

Someday, when enough time passes, it would be released.

Also, if you go over the line with hypnosis, someday you will get used to it and the effect will be lesser—I've heard that's a possibility. It's not about Kino-san, but it's the same as getting accustomed to antidotes and poisons... If you compare the rhythm to music, it's like getting bored of a melody—

Consciousness.

"That's wrong."

Rurero-san finally seemed to enter the conclusion.

"Not that...more simply.

"You just need to let the rhythm on.

"You just need to let the Thought Manipulation on.

"You just need to make a neutral rhythm your basis—

"—That's how it is."

"...**Letting it on**?"

Letting it on.

What does letting it on mean?

"Aah—I see."

The one to agree the fastest was Aikawa-san.

Her expression—was irritated from the bottom of her heart.

"...So that's how it is. That's certainly fitting for a *Cursing Name*—keh. Makes me feel nauseous."

"Jun-san—what do you mean?"

"In other words, if you let the pendulum swing forever in front of you, the Thought Manipulation won't have time to fade away—that is, if the logic is to make the person remember the rhythm. A hypnosis without breaks. Hah—I see, there's no weakness. There's no way to release it in a state like that. There's a guy thinking crazy stuff."

"What do you mean? Explain, Jun."

"..."

...It seems the fox-masked man still hadn't understood.

Perhaps that person was no good.

Aikawa-san turned towards Rurero-san without answering her father's demand and, with a gesture of her chin, ordered her to explain. The haughtiness of commanding one of the *Thirteen Stairs*, the fox-masked man's *limbs*, like that, even in such a situation, made me feel relieved.

But—upon hearing Rurero-san's next words,

That feeling—would freeze.

"**The heart's rhythm**."

Rurero-san pointed at her own chest and said.

"Using her heartbeat as a base—Magokoro was put under the control of the Thought Manipulation."

"H-heart...!"

Her heartbeat—as a base.

Then—no, calm down, then, that would mean, what would that mean? I can intuitively understand that this is

something absurd, but I can't seem to fully understand what that exactly means.

Err—

Be it Magokoro or Humanity's Last, the existence that can surpass everything, the Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro—since she was human... Even if you're not human, even if you are a monster, as long as you are alive, there is no way your heart isn't beating.

And the heart is an involuntary muscle.

It cannot move as you want.

That's why—even if it is inside your body, even if it is a core part of your body, it possesses the particularity of not being controllable and being an organ of the highest importance.

Making that rhythm a base is—

"**Always on—and neutral**."

We were not searching for an exterior source—

But for an interior source.

So that's how it was.

"Hold on a minute...that's...more than being a secret technique—isn't it practically a banned move—"

I, powerlessly—filled with despair, muttered.

"What a technique... Then it would have been way better to not release the three chains..."

"I completely agree."

Next to Rurero-san saying that, Emoto-san wholeheartedly agreed. Aikawa-san was, needless to say, still making a displeased expression.

The fox-masked man—

"Hm."

Showed his usual reaction.

Without seeming particularly moved—rather, his

reaction looked as if he was feeling refreshed that his question had been solved.

"I see—her heart, huh. That was a blind spot. Talking about a fixed rhythm to engrave a base—there is no other bodily watch that can surpass the heart—that being said, that was only possible because the heart in question was Magokoro's. Because, for normal people, the rate of one's heartbeat can easily fluctuate. Hm, he skillfully grasped Humanity's Last's ultimate aspect—"

"After all, it's meaningless if not for a case like this," Aikawa-san said after the fox-masked man. "Does that Thought Manipulation stay effective forever after being activated, Puppeteer-san?"

"...I have no idea."

"You're both experts, aren't you?"

"Though that's true..."

"Then predict."

"Well...it will probably end after being activated—Tokinomiya didn't use *techniques* gentle enough for that to be the case. It was probably like the reflex of Pavlov's dog—

The hypnosis will stay effective until her heart stops.

At the current point, if her *mind* is completely dominated, there shouldn't be anything we can do—that's what the fox-masked man said earlier, but hearts usually don't have much of a difference between people, unless they have a disease, their rhythm can't change that much. Therefore, in this case, even more so for Magokoro-chan—I guess."

"..."

Until her heart stopped—

If you were to rephrase that, wouldn't that be **until she died**?

Until—her life until now, a life that had always been so dominated that even she didn't know her exact age—until Omokage Magokoro's life ended. The fact that he laid out an unbreakable chain that wouldn't allow her to escape the domination of the Thought Manipulation—

Even setting allies or enemies aside, it was unforgivable.

Unforgivable.

I thought that.

And at the same time, a dark feeling was pressing in on me.

An absolutely unbreakable—hypnosis.

Control of the mind.

"Nah, not control—" Rurero-san said. "Not control. This is a release. Because it is a release—he can use such absurdly powerful techniques, such absurd Thought Manipulation becomes possible."

"'Becomes possible'. Hm. I see, I was able to understand—the reason why Jikoku did something so extreme and probably awfully time consuming—"

Kukukuh, he laughed pleasantly.

Pleasantly, regardless of the situation.

Really—

Did this person have no heart?

"Rurero—Sonoki. I can only conjecture what your opinions on the matter must be—but Jikoku. Tokinomiya Jikoku, Thought Manipulator. He was—among the members of the *Thirteen Stairs*, the thirteen including Akira, no, even including the past members, Rizumu and Izumu—

"The only one—

"Who really wanted to see the end of the world.

"Not swearing loyalty towards me, interested in me, bartering or following his own desires—he was the only man with the same unswayable and unbreakable conviction as me. Rurero—"

The fox-masked man turned his words towards Rurero-san.

"You might understand about half of Jikoku's feelings—at the very least, you seemed to wish for the end of the world, the end of the Story. Well, Noise might have been in a closer position with his habit of saying how much he wanted to die—however, neither of you have the same purity as Jikoku."

"Tokinomiya—Jikoku."

"In the same way the *Thirteen Stairs* were *limbs* to let me see the end of the world, to let me finish reading the Story—for Jikoku, my existence was a *means*... To see the end of the world, to finish reading the Story."

Tokinomiya Jikoku—he was the only person whose reason for joining the *Thirteen Stairs* was still a mystery to me. Deep down I thought it might have been a similar reason to that—but I didn't think **it could have been that reason**.

Then—

Considering what Rurero-san said.

"So—even if he cast that kind of Thought Manipulation on Magokoro—well, it's not as mysterious anymore. In case I screwed up on getting the **possible** *end of the world* that was on hand, he prepared to still be able to see *the end of the world*—thinking from Jikoku's

position, that should be about it. Though that still leaves out the reason for letting Magokoro escape from the *Thirteen Stairs*—it's unclear, I think. After all, at that point, my strategy against my enemy was going nearly perfectly."

"..."

I wonder—about that.

By the time I was shown to Magokoro in Sumiyuri Academy's second gymnasium—Magokoro's escape was nearly decided, so in this case, I feel like you would normally see it as Jikoku simply creating an occasion for that. That being said, what the fox-masked man said wasn't completely off the mark—

About that—

I guess we had to ask the person in question...

Tokinomiya Jikoku himself.

"Any contact from Konomi after that?"

"Aah, err..." Rurero-san hesitated over the fox-masked man's words before answering. "Nothing for the moment—but we're talking about Konomi. I doubt she went to pursue Jikoku alone—she said she would use the Miotsukushi Sisters..."

...Ichirizuka Konomi.

Having had no contact with her since yesterday, perhaps—she had had the tables turned on her by Tokinomiya Jikoku. Being the *Space Creator*, she probably didn't have much fighting ability—no, but the Miotsukushi Sisters...

Umm.

Since I was attacked by those three at the Imperial Garden, I couldn't think calmly. Thinking normally, then, was that also an aspect of Tokinomiya Jikoku's pursuit...?

However, why...

"Hm. Well, there shouldn't be any worries for Konomi."

Ignoring my thoughts, the fox-masked man said carefreely, not even with any special trust.

Speaking of that—

At that time, on this second floor, he asserted to Rurero-san—that Ichirizuka Konomi wouldn't betray him.

That also seemed different from trust—

But it was similar to trust.

To the point you could correctly call it that.

"—Alright, Rurero. I understand well. I will give you my thanks—take care of yourself now. Go to the second floor and rest."

"Ah, no...Mr. Fox. I'm fine, this kind of injury—it's already nearly healed..."

"Is that so? Doctor?"

"No way."

For some reason, Emoto-san answered to Mr. Fox by making an overreaction, turning her neck and spreading out her arms.

"In reality, you shouldn't even be standing up or walking. Rurero-san, you are only forcing your body to walk by using your body like a puppet."

"Shut up... Our bodies are trained differently. Don't measure me by your normal standards."

"I am properly using Rurero-san standards."

"You know, I'm thankful for you attending to and treating me, but it's annoying when you're so clingy."

"Even if I am annoying, injuries come first. Don't be selfish like a kid, Rurero-san."

...Ooh.

Emoto-san wouldn't step back when injuries were involved...

Normally, if you told her she was annoying, she would immediately start crying, but now she talked like a reliable doctor. Even though she was wearing a white blouse and bikini.

"...Fine, I got it."

Saying that, Rurero-san raised her hips unwillingly and reluctantly. Emoto-san swiftly supported her from the side. With nonchalant but flawless moves.

"On that note, we will go to the second floor—hey, Ikkun."

"Yes?"

"That tattoo boy, Zerozaki Hitoshiki-kun, he doesn't have any injuries, does he?"

"Eh? What do you mean?"

"Like a chronic disease or the aftereffect of an injury?"

"...? I don't think he has anything like that."

"I see. Then he really was sleepy... Mm. Then let's go, Rurero-san. Want to stop by the toilet?"

"Don't ask that in front of people..."

...

Rurero-san was seriously being treated like a child.

They really were a great combination...

Those two exited the waiting room in that manner, then—

Then.

On the tatami mat, around the tea table, three people.

Three people were left.

Humanity's Strongest and Humanity's Worst and Humanity's Weakest.

Aikawa Jun and Saitou Takashi and—and me.

Well, in this case—

You could say the actors were all present, now that there were less people.

"...I've been wondering about it since we were in the car, but Ii-tan, why does that doctor call you Ikkun so familiarly?"

An unexpectedly sharp question came flying from Aikawa-san.

Err—how much did the fox-masked man know... From how he acted, it didn't look like he knew that Emoto-san betrayed him *for real*, but—umm, if he didn't know, it was better to hide it.

We were already in this situation, it couldn't become even more complicated.

As if I would let it become more complicated.

A more complicated situation couldn't even exist.

In the first place—

The war between the fox-masked man and I was already over. Us meeting here was an incredible irregularity, so—

"Be...because we're mail buddies."

"..."

"..."

Uwaah, I screwed up.

That's painful in modern days...

To begin with, I couldn't type emails.

"More importantly, Jun-san, what were you doing? We were all worried. Hikari-san was so worried she even entrusted her flesh to me—"

"Don't say flesh. It sounds lewd."

The forbidden technique of answering a question with

another was unexpectedly effective. Aikawa-san acted awkwardly. "Everyone was worried" worked surprisingly well.

"Well, a lot..."

"..."

It seems she didn't want to talk about it.

Hm, the fox-masked man—removed his mask.

Laid out the fox mask on the table.

Ooh...it was the first time I saw them lined up, but as expected, looking at them like that—they looked more like twins than father and daughter...

Even surpassing the difference in gender and the age gap.

What was it...

Was it because their existences were similar?

Not on the outside, but on the inside.

Well, maybe it was simply because the fox-masked man looked much younger than his real age.

"Now, I'm at a loss."

The fox-masked man said.

"Things have become extraordinarily bothersome."

"...That sounds like a weak statement coming from you, Mr. Fox. At the very least, that's the first time—I see you take that attitude."

"I am still a human. Even I can get troubled. Hey, my enemy. That is troubling. The connection between you and me is too deep and firm. That in itself brought me the utmost joy when declaring war—but when the war has been over for half a month and the connection still isn't severed, it's quite a bother."

"That's a really selfish way to put it..."

Are you an easily bored seventeen year old maiden?

Just the other day you were dancing with joy for every common point we had...

It wasn't really for revenge, but I said.

"Rather, what cannot be cut is the connection with Magokoro, isn't it, Mr. Fox?"

"...Hm. You say whatever you want, don't you?"

The fox-masked man said.

Then, continuing—he said something outrageous.

"However... About that, well, you can nearly—say that it is over."

"...What do you mean?"

"That Magokoro—that Humanity's Last *rampaged*, you know—I have no means to stop that. To be frank, in the bottom of my heart, I thought that if I left Magokoro in your care, she wouldn't rampage, my enemy. In addition to being Magokoro's scabbard—you are also the key after all."

"Even without me—Magokoro would rampage in the future."

"Think whatever you want."

The fox-masked man went silent after saying that.

I was displeased with his attitude.

After Emoto-san and Rurero-san left the room—he somehow relaxed... But what meaning did it have?

"...? I thought that—you were thinking along the lines of 'whether Magokoro rampages or not, it's the same in the end', but—is that wrong?"

"It is. Setting Jikoku aside—about Magokoro. It's completely wrong. You brought up two issues, right? What kind of technique and how did he cast it, right? The answer to these two is now clear. *A technique releasing*

Magokoro and *posthypnotic suggestion with the heart's rhythm*. Then—with those answers sorted out, a new question appears. In other words—"

"**What will Magokoro do next**?"

At that point—Aikawa-san butted in.

Looking so displeased she might click her tongue.

"What—next?"

"'What will the released Magokoro wish for?' Ii-tan, Omokage Magokoro—the complete form of myself, the Orange Seed, what do you think she will wish for, from the heart, after being released?"

"..."

From the heart.

From the heart, what will Magokoro wish for—

Being continuously oppressed.

Constantly, constantly, continuously.

She couldn't even survive without restraining herself—like Kunagisa Tomo. Being perfect, she had to wish for something imperfect in order to live. What will Magokoro, who had to wish to be unhappy, wish from her heart—

"—Revenge."

...I said.

"At first, probably—revenge."

She doesn't resent—she said.

She doesn't really care, she said.

However—that was just lip service.

I won't say lip service is bad. Rather, it's good.

But—

The style of Humanity's Last, being unchallenged and undefeated—is definitely not something Magokoro wished for on her own.

Like Hime-chan's act, a way to get by.

Like Kunagisa's restrictions, a technique to survive.

How was Magokoro—

Was she virtuous?

Was she just virtuous?

If she wasn't only virtuous.

Then—

If those chains were removed.

If she were removed—from various dominations and oppressions, I was sure Magokoro would wish for revenge. She should. No, it was doubtful whether there would be enough emotion in her purpose for it to be called revenge. Magokoro had received too much persecution—to use the word revenge, to use words like revenge, atonement, grudge, resentment or venting out.

Like my defunct little sister.

Then—that was no longer revenge.

That was destruction.

Thorough destruction.

Without any mercy, any hesitation, unavoidable—thorough and overwhelming destruction work, destruction impetus.

Without mercy nor hesitance—

Destruction.

Transgression.

"...But if that—if that was Magokoro's true desire—that would be too sad."

I said.

"Then—wouldn't that mean that none of us—were able to comprehend her true emotions?"

"That kind of thing isn't something we can comprehend." The fox-masked man said coldly. "So the

problem is the target of that revenge—my enemy. I have no idea of how long Magokoro's destruction impetus will last—even then, there are three targets that will certainly be attacked for revenge and get destroyed."

"Three—"

"**Myself**. **The ER3 System**. **And—you**."

The fox-masked man's words—after all this time.

I came to think they didn't compound any emotion.

"If she were to resent anything, it would be those three."

"..."

"No matter what you think."

I—had nothing to say.

I didn't know what to say.

However—

At the very least, I thought it was correct.

From Magokoro's position—absolutely.

Because she probably cursed the world she was born in.

"...You reap what you sow. Nothing more than that."

Aikawa-san said, as if it was someone else's business.

"All the idiocies you did finally came to bite you back. Both this shitty father and Ii-tan. Well, it might directly be Tokinomiya Jikoku's fault, but even then, I have no words of sympathy."

"Hm. That is true."

The fox-masked man agreed with his daughter's words.

"In reality—if the released Magokoro becomes my enemy, I have zero chance of winning. So I have no other choice than to be still and wait to be killed like a carp on a chopping board."

"Ahahah. Serves you right!"

Aikawa-san...

All of a sudden, she seemed to be having fun...

"...After all, the Orange Seed was able to bring down my outdated daughter in one strike, even with multiple restrictions."

The fox-masked man unexpectedly fought back.

Aikawa-san's smile froze.

"Mm. Reminds me, how long will you still name yourself Humanity's Strongest after losing that flashily?"

"...Ugh."

Aikawa-san flinched.

I thought it was an ill-mannered way to phrase it and that it didn't really have to be said, but what the fox-masked man said was certainly true.

"After being humiliated so much, I'd be too embarrassed to name myself Humanity's Strongest. Mm, hey, Jun, what do you think about that? Are you going to be called Humanity's Second Strongest Contractor from now on?"

"—No."

Aikawa-san swayed her head in a big motion.

Somehow she looked like a big shot.

"Not at all."

Aikawa-san said "Not at all".

"Not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all, not at all."

Aikawa-san said "Not at all" ten times.

"Yes, certainly, at that time, she did hit me and I ended up losing consciousness, but I wish you'd stop deciding with just wins or losses, strength or weakness. I wish you didn't say that, just because of that, Aikawa Jun is no

longer the Strongest."

"..."

"..."

...

Humanity's Strongest excuse began!

"The 'Strongest' isn't in that sense. I have been thinking about things for a long time over here. Because I'm an adult. I wish you didn't complain about every little trivial thing. It's like pulling the rug from under a multilayered box, really. You get it, don't you? Look, I don't think you can judge who the Strongest is with such a small sample size. If it's just once or twice, it could just be a fluke, so yeah, you need to take into consideration the long piled up experience, the efforts and these kinds of things, right? Well well, it's not like I don't understand your perspective, I even have somewhat thought of a flexible counterplan."

"..."

"..."

I got it...

I got it, so please stop, Aikawa-san...

"Hm. Then try fighting her once more. And protect me like that, my daughter."

"Ugh!"

She was clearly at a loss for words.

Somehow...

I wondered about how ten years ago, when for the fox-masked man, Saitou Takashi, Aikawa-san's existence was just a tool, how did Saitou Takashi use Aikawa-san—but I see, he did it like that.

Of course you'll end up being resented, Mr. Fox...

But... She was totally being handled like a kid.

Last month, in October—was that also the case?

Was it always like this?

Their father daughter reunion—

I still couldn't think of it as a peaceful family reunion.

But, well...even then, Saitou Takashi being Humanity's Worst—doesn't change. Aikawa-san's words "you reap what you sow" were perfectly fitting.

It wasn't wrong in my case either.

"Hey, hey, hold on, shitty father. If you treat me like an incompetent character, it'll really be the end of the world, you know."

"Isn't it fine? It's the end, after all. Let's all be incompetent."

"No way. I don't want to end like the last chapter of a manga axed for any reason other than *not being popular*."

"Let's do an embarrassing confession contest. First, Humanity's Worst, me. To be honest, I haven't thought of anything."

"That, we know."

"I also know to a disgusting degree."

"Hm. What a silly tale."

The fox-masked man said in a self-mocking way.

"To think—that the world will end in this unrelated place—abruptly. Good grief. Not as a result of our fight—not as a result of the fight with my enemy, nor as a result of my research—just because of one *limb*'s selfish actions, everything will be prevented... But I wanted to see the world's end—the Story's end. No—as Jikoku thought, the current Magokoro—her existence itself might be *the world's end*—No...um. No...not that...not with that analysis—the world... Aah...I see, so that's what it is...if it's that..."

If it is.

I was running after something worthless.

The fox-masked man—said so.

'To think the happiness I was searching for was this close—even jokes can become poison. What are you telling Maeterlinck to do in this day and age."

"..."

The fox-masked man—

Why didn't he think of the same thing as Tokinomiya Jikoku until now? If you think that the Orange Seed is Aikawa Jun's evolved form, then Magokoro herself—Magokoro herself being *the world's end* is a pretty fair possibility, even without being Tokinomiya Jikoku—

No.

It was not that he didn't think about it.

That was—a previous failure.

Since he already failed once ten years ago—he wouldn't repeat anything twice, be it a success or a failure, was it because of that way of thinking? I didn't think the explanation held itself with just that...

But.

"You said it was worthless, didn't you?"

I—

I said, facing the fox-masked man.

"Just now, you called the world's end—worthless."

"...I meant—if Magokoro was it, then it is worthless. Feels like a novel I enjoyed reading ended not half-assedly, but with a worthless punchline."

"If—"

I said.

With conviction.

And—Kunagisa's words.

Remembering Kunagisa's final request.

"If you used this as an occasion to give up on *the world's end*, *the Story's* end—that you called *worthless*, if you are able to abandon it—**I could do something about this case**."

"..."

The fox-masked man—

Narrowed his eyes and dubiously looked back at me.

"'Do something'—what exactly. You are without a doubt resented like me—after all, originally, the one who opened her lock and pushed her to the position of Orange Seed—who pushed Omokage Magokoro, who was as incomplete **as her seniors**—was you, Nonsense User."

"I know."

The responsibility for Magokoro.

The responsibility for the Orange Seed—

Seeing the apartment's miserable state, I realized it.

However, it was not responsibility that I needed.

Responsibility didn't matter.

It wasn't that—

I wanted to move for something much more important.

Move.

"You also heard Rurero's story, right? There's nothing we can do—Magokoro won't stop her rampage—until she dies, until her heart stops."

"I know that. I know, I know, I am probably—the one who knows that the most. Therefore—no, even regardless of causes and effect—"

I said.

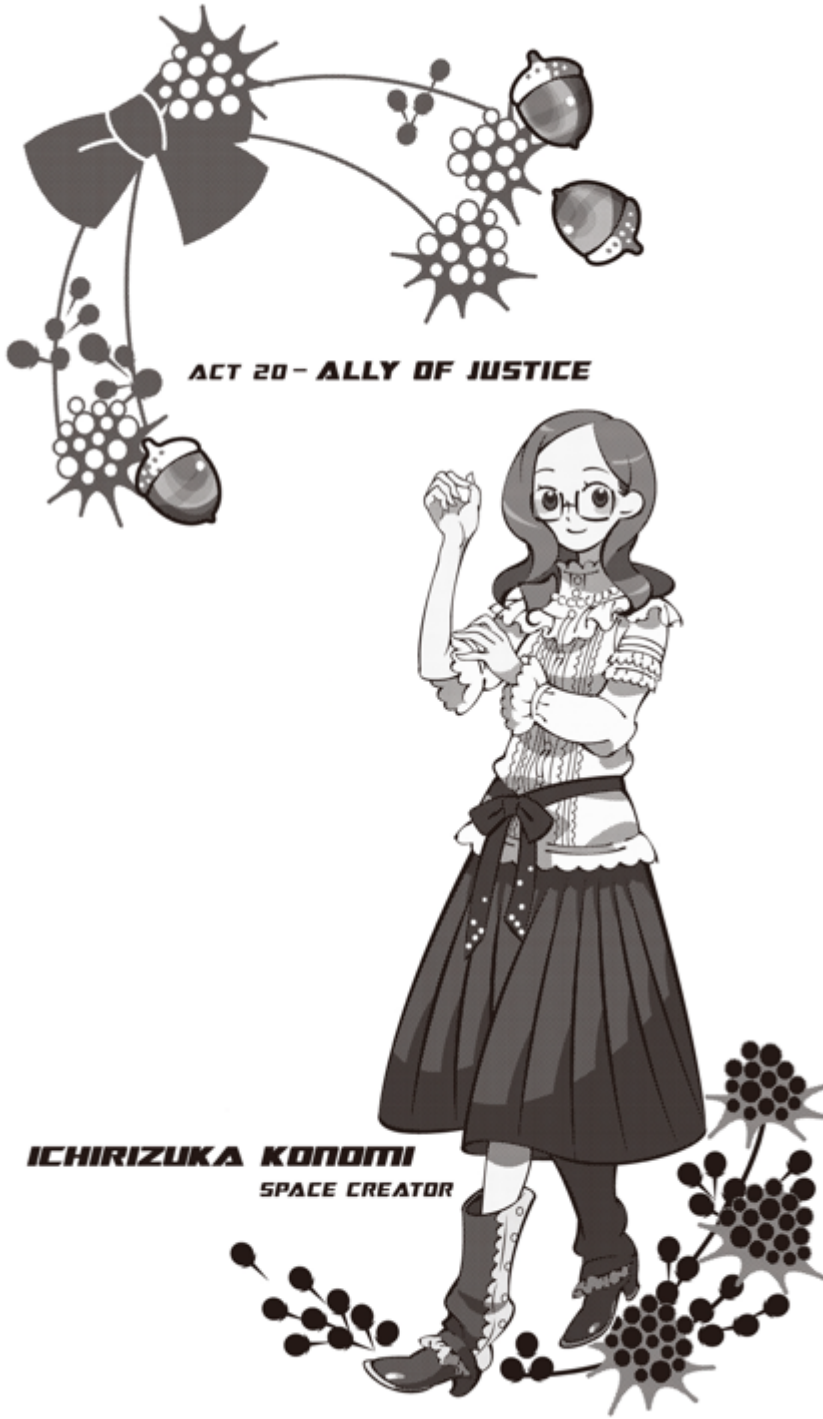
"I need to save—Magokoro."

Because she was my friend.

Because that was surely—my last role.

I had still it left undone—
Because it was the only thing I was good enough for.

ACT 20- ALLY OF JUSTICE



ICHIRIZUKA KONOMI
SPACE CREATOR

0

Neglecting self-consciousness is only deluded attachment.
It is the process of allowing a diminutive to diminish even further.

1

Ichirizuka Konomi-

I had already heard beforehand about Konomi-san's appearance from Izumu-kun—and I was able to confirm it at first glance.

In short, the kind that would read poems in a library—

A serious and upright woman.

That described her perfectly.

Around Shingyokyoku, on Shijo street, in a bookstore about midway in between Kawaramachi street and Karasuma street, reading Cocteau poems in the Shincho bunko corner on the first floor, she fit the image.

Space...Creator.

"Mm. Hello."

Realizing that I was approaching her—obviously, needless to say, she already knew my appearance—Konomi promptly closed her book and put it back in its place.

Then she bowed deeply.

"Nice to meet you. I am the second step of the *Thirteen Stairs*—Ichirizuka Konomi. Pleased to know you from now on."

"...I assume my introduction is unnecessary."

"Yes. I am well aware," Raising her head, she smiled. "I've heard many rumors—even before you became Mr. Fox's enemy."

"Is that so—that's...I see."

"I do possess a few old friends at the ER3 System. I also have somewhat of a connection with an affiliate of the Kunagisa Syndicate, Ichigai."

"Heeh—with that Ichigai. Then we might have crossed paths six years ago. Err..."

"Please call me Konomi. Though I am not Humanity's Strongest—I am not too fond of being called by my surname."

Konomi-san stuck out her tongue in a playful manner.

"Because 'Ichirizuka' doesn't really have a good meaning if you read it backwards."

"Then, Konomi-san—that's fine, right?"

Tasteless glasses with black rims.

Hair parted in two.

Chic colors, plain clothes.

How should I put it, amongst the *Thirteen Stairs* and their mostly strong characters, she looked like someone who doesn't stand out much—if we're only talking about exterior components, only Zukin-chan who represented the image of the *high school girl* could beat her—however.

Even then, even after having exchanged so few words with her, I could already feel it, the bizarre sensation her demeanor gave off—she had no visible weaknesses. No matter where you came at her from, she had no spots you could take advantage of. That strange sensation in itself was enough to pressure me.

She wasn't an opponent I could be careless against.

I felt on edge.

However—

She was smiling with no concern.

"Oh please, don't be so wary of me—I'm as scared as you are. We're both deprived of combat abilities. If worse came to worst, you could pin me down with your strength. So I am more scared than you here."

Look, she said as she rolled up her sleeves.

"What can I do with these twigs?"

"...Right."

"Also, we shouldn't be in an adversarial relationship anymore, right? Then I would prefer for both of us to continue this conversation with utmost transparency."

For starters—Konomi-san swiftly pointed at the store's automatic entrance door as if prompting me.

"Let's talk while walking. I might just be fussy but—I don't really like talking in one place."

"Understood."

"Then."

Konomi-san moved to pass by my side—with totally silent footsteps. She had moved. It took me a moment to comprehend that—but I immediately followed after her.

How do I put it—it was natural.

It was too natural.

Too reasonable.

...Our combat potential was probably negligible for both of us...

But even then, I was the weaker one—I thought. Rather than "mine", that was the Nonsense User's thought.

Even if we were both of the non-combatant type, the worlds we lived in were too different. You could say I was just a civilian losing his way in the battlefield—but Konomi-san was probably a civilian who was born on and

grew up on battlefields. I think that lack of weaknesses stemmed from that. Of course, the *Space Creator* was probably something transmitted over generations—but that was a more fundamental problem.

However—

Forgetting her appearance for an instant, what Izumu-kun said about her personality—she felt a little different from that. I think he said she had a pretty nasty personality but... Well, that was one and a half months ago, so to be honest, I didn't really remember it clearly. I might have just been remembering wrong.

From what I could see, she was in her mid-twenties—slightly younger than Emoto-san and Rurero-san. While I was thinking about what her exact age was, we came out to the street at Shijo towards the west.

"Still—" Konomi-san started. She seemed very emotive. "—I didn't think there would be a day where I could peacefully walk alongside you like this. It's very mysterious."

"That's...the same for me. I was in your care night and day, from the front and the back, ever since you had me meet Noise on the subway—until just yesterday, when Misora-chan and Takami-chan were on the verge of killing me."

"My, please. I am not too fond of when you talk so sarcastically."

"Want to lock our arms?"

"That would be going too far. Also, my arms are reserved to be locked only with Mr. Fox's."

Though Mr. Fox and I locking arms surely won't ever happen for eternity—Konomi-san added bitterly.

She's not someone you can hate, I thought.

However, on that point—her abnormality, her *Space Creation* made that a more complex issue.

"..."

The 2nd of November.

Wednesday afternoon, 4 o'clock.

I had a meeting with Ichirizuka Konomi.

After that—

After hearing Rurero-san's story.

I'd said some grandiose things to the fox-masked man—however, realistically speaking, the truth was that, at this point in time, there was nothing I could do anything about.

And talking about reality—

Like Zerozaki, I had pulled an all-nighter, and until then I was tensed up—but when Emoto-san examined all of us individually after accompanying Rurero-san to her room on the second floor, she ordered me to take medical rest.

"Please go to sleep."

She said.

"Ikkun probably...hasn't slept much. And on top of that, a few...a few things happened, so your mind must be confused and panicked."

"..."

I wondered if there was no other way to put it.

Setting aside whether I was sleepy or not—it was true that my body was demanding some rest. I had been at my limit for some time.

Normally—

Normally, it wouldn't have been unnatural for me to collapse after parting with Kunagisa. Why that didn't happen was simply because—Kunagisa had released me,

also more importantly because of Magokoro's situation.

"Hm."

The fox masked man said.

"My enemy. Just in case, to answer your nonsense from now—sadly, this isn't a demand we can establish a deal on."

"..."

"No, it's not like I'm doubting your capability to stop Magokoro—rather, I think you are the only one capable of that, currently. Only you, the scabbard to that sword. Although the probability is quite low—there is a chance. But, my enemy."

The fox-masked man—put his mask back on.

"Even if you managed to stop Magokoro, I would probably soon begin yearning for the next *end of the world*. Using this outdated model."

The fox masked man pointed at Aikawa-san.

Don't go around calling people outdated, Aikawa-san answered with irritation. Well, of course she would.

"One of my principles is to keep promises as much as I can—but that also means I don't take on promises I can't keep. As long as I'm alive, I cannot give up on the world's end, the Story's end."

"...I bet."

It was—an unreasonable deal.

As I thought—

I couldn't make this fox-masked man—Humanity's Worst, Saitou Takashi, give up on the world's end as long as he was still alive.

If possible, I was aiming for two birds with one stone.

"Is that so..."

"Sorry. So—what to do, my enemy?"

"...Anyway—for now, let's just sleep. Although I said some grandiose things, it's not like I have a concrete plan—"

Right, the fox-masked agreed.

Looking at me and Aikawa-sana alternatively.

"In any case—for starters, the best plan for now is to gather at a single place. Hm. The Saitou Clinic, huh—I thought of it as a finished place, however—in the end, I had no other choices but to return here. That's quite an unpleasant story. Oops...right, I must also gather the remaining *Thirteen Stairs*-"

"...Then, excuse me."

The fox-masked man—

He probably didn't know of Zukin-chan's death yet.

Neither of the circumstances surrounding Utage Kudan—Shigai Touno.

But I didn't feel like informing him.

It's not like I strongly wanted to go to sleep—

But I decided to do as Emoto-san suggested.

The first of November—

The second floor was already full, so I went to the room Kuchiha-chan probably used—and decided to take a nap there.

If I remember correctly, in August, Kuchiha-chan wouldn't let me in under any circumstances. Of course, I hadn't expected I would enter Kuchiha's room under those circumstances, but—well, as expected, Emoto-san had cleaned out the entire place, so there wasn't even a shadow of Kuchiha-chan's presence left-

When I woke up, it was midnight.

I had some bad sleep—and woke up.

Even though I should've had plenty of sleep...it didn't

feel sufficient.

We were in November, so even in Kyoto, the morning should have been cold...

Then why,

Why was I sleeping so badly...

I felt like I had a bad dream.

It was as usual.

I unsteadily exited the room—

The building was all dark.

Of course, we were in the middle of the night.

Everyone should've been asleep.

Aikawa-san, the fox-masked man, and Emoto-san.

And needless to say, Rurero-san.

When I was thinking that, I saw some light leaking from the gap between the waiting room doors. Thinking "Aah, I see," I approached the room, opened the sliding door and there, as I thought, was Zerozaki Hitoshiki—drinking tea in a relaxed manner.

Tea he'd probably brewed himself.

"Yo, Ii-tan."

"Ya, Zerorin."

Since Zerozaki has been sleeping since midday he probably woke up in the night. Then, well, not having anything special to do, he seemed bored.

I brought a cushion to the side facing Zerozaki with the table between us, and sat cross-legged on it.

"For someone who just slept 10 hours, you look awfully unrefreshed, don't you?"

"That's because the dakimakura I'm used to isn't here...so my sleep was slightly shallow. Well, even then, I wasn't not sleepy."

"...If you're starving, want me to cook you something?"

"Your always hungry character will catch on if you're not careful... No thanks. I don't really feel hungry."

"That said, you haven't eaten anything in a whole day, right?"

"I'm used to fasting. I can function on just water for three days. I'm talking from experience, you see."

"Hahn. Is that from your ER3 days?"

"Yeah—that reminds me, you went abroad. That means you were around there, right? I just thought I hadn't confirmed it yet."

"Yeah, kinda. Well, I don't really want to talk about that though. You see, Hitoshiki-kun kinda went through some pathetic experiences over there."

"Then don't say it. I won't ask," I said. "But, my bad. Making you come back expressly. I hesitated but in the end I decided to apologize for that."

"Don't sweat it. Even if you hadn't called me, even if that denim braid woman hadn't come—I'm sure we would have met here. If that Omokage Magokoro girl really did annihilate the Zerozaki Clan."

"...Are you thinking about revenge?"

I think—

Magokoro didn't even remember that.

Because that must have happened while she was nearly perfectly under the control of Kino-san, Rurero-san and Tokinomiya Jikoku's chains—

Even then.

If she did kill his family—then the intention of the perpetrator might not matter.

But, Zerozaki said,

"I'm not.

"It's as I said to that fox—I didn't really think of them as family. From my perspective, they were just **people around nearby**. I was constantly running away. The chairman from middle school really left an impression on me. There was just one guy annoyingly chasing after me, though—but he's no longer around. I really only took the Zerozaki name, as I said, simply because I liked it..."

"..."

Even then—

We would have met here, huh.

"I won't ever be able to understand you," is what I thought of saying. However, if I opened my mouth, what would've probably come out was "As expected of my reverse side,"—so I didn't say anything.

Zerozaki,

"Kahahah."

Laughed.

"I heard from that perverted woman when we passed each other."

"...? Aah, Emoto-san. What'd you hear?"

"That Omokage Magokoro—The Orange Seed is rampaging. And that was the cause of that wreck."

"—Zerozaki. What do you think I should do?"

"Whatever you want. That story is already outside of what I can influence—it's the same as in May. Looks like I can't partake in your stories."

"Yes, looks like it."

"And I'm completely late—if the situation was still in the middle of that war with that fox jerk, I probably could have been of use to you. But when it comes to your friends, to your human relationships, it's impossible."

"..."

"If those Miotsukushi twins come to assault you again, I don't mind protecting you, but outside of that, it's your job."

"I see... You're right," I agreed. "If possible, I would have liked to leave the Thought Manipulator, Tokinomiya Jikoku, in your care too, though."

"I'm not too fond of that kind of twisted stuff. My way of doing things is more akin to finishing the job before you're able to get cursed. But—well, let me see. I guess I can give you at least one counterplan. That level of interference shouldn't be a bother, probably," Zerozaki said. "According to the woman that told me about Jikoku Tokinomiya—'*If you were to make him into your enemy*'."

"If I were to?"

"'*Don't see anything.*'"

"What?"

"Don't see anything, she said. I don't get it either. Wordplay is more of your genre, right? Write it down or whatever you please."

"..."

"It was just that."

It was just that.

After that, we held normal, worthless conversations for the rest of the night, until the morning came and everyone woke up.

On my side, I talked about a few things that had happened this year.

Seeing that Zerozaki said a few times "I might know that person," it really looked like there was a mysterious connection between Zerozaki and me.

I heard stories about the Zerozaki *family*.

The Zerozaki Clan.

The story about Zerozaki's big brother—and little sister.

Then, I heard about the time when Zerozaki went on as a normal middle school student. It seemed he used the name *Migiwame Toshiki*, the one which fox-masked man brought up.

Also, his meeting with Izumu-kun—

That took place some time near his graduation from middle school.

"We've both led worthless lives, huh."

"Yeah, totally."

Zerozaki laughed—I didn't.

Then—

While everyone, including Rurero-san, was eating the breakfast prepared by Emoto-san and Aikawa-san (looking at them from behind during the cooking, it was a bizarre scene)—

Rurero-san's phone rang.

It was a call from Konomi-san—the first thing was confirming whether they were able to bring the fox-masked into safety, then what she said was—

I captured Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Apparently.

So—

End of flashback, that's how we got here...

"...Not really, I don't have a hobby of pointlessly praising others, so understand that this is just me stating my impression—Konomi-san. Honestly, among the *Thirteen Stairs*, you look like the most capable one. Among that group of weirdos, it's like you're the only one with

the right to be a leader."

"I am terribly grateful for your praise, but you think too highly of me. I am not too fond of being overestimated."

"Thinking back on it, apparently Izumu-kun didn't have the best impression of you—but now I think I get why."

"That went for both of us. After all, Izumu-san's head isn't really logic-minded. Or should I say he takes things too simply? And for you, who sealed Izumu-san—and Rizumu-san with words, forgetting the enemy/ally relations, I am quite impressed. Though, of course, keep that between us."

"Isn't that just flattery, though?"

"Not at all. This is not flattery. If I had to say, this is a kind of narcissism. Because my *Space Creation* and your *Nonsense* were basically founded with the same mechanisms. In that sense, I have real sympathy for you—well, needless to say, hatred of the same breed too though."

"...Is that why you used Misora-chan and Takami-chan to try and kill me? Because of hatred of the same breed, of resentment?"

"If I had a reason to kill you, rather than hatred, it would most likely be because our characters overlap."

"..."

As if I'm gonna get killed for a reason like that.

So absurd.

"But it's not like that really was the reason, Nonsense User-san. Please do not get the wrong idea. That was merely the request of Miotsukushi's Misora-san and Takami-san. I did nothing more than support them."

"I don't really understand the circumstances yet. ...Actually, I was thinking that I should at least ask you about this, to clarify this point before meeting Tokinomiya Jikoku—in the end, that day, what did you do? I can't seem to visualize the timeline. I can't feel right without being able to read the timetable."

"...After Mr. Fox surrendered to you and the war ended—I was mainly in charge of managing the losses. Since Mr. Fox is who he is, he isn't suited towards that kind of job."

"Yeah, obviously."

It also didn't look like he was suited for any other kind of job.

Well, that should be a valid alibi.

...But, Konomi-san was frank about the fox-masked man. That aspect differed from the Miotsukushi Sisters—didn't it?

Ichirizuka Konomi.

"Of course, Mr. Fox persuading each and everyone personally would have been more sincere, but—separately from that, I did a slight internal investigation on the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"No, even if you can say that the current *Thirteen Stairs* have their own objectives, at their core, they were resources gathered for the purpose of defeating *Ii-chan*—with the war with you being over, I thought I had to reorder the *space* around there. Basically, that was just Ichirizuka Konomi's personal preference of disliking gaps in spaces. The *Thirteen Stairs* having drifted from its original purpose, let's just say I cleaned some parts that were accepted until now."

"...Because of that task, Tokinomiya Jikoku's twistedness became apparent?"

"That's the gist of it. I somehow managed to corner him with questions, but he ran away. When I looked further into the matter—things cleared up. ...But that happened last month anyway, so it was already too late."

That didn't count much as having taken the upper hand, Konomi added.

Even though that must have been quite a feat, she was humble.

"Hmm..."

During the second half of October, I spent my days being wary of my surroundings, but with nothing happening, you could say I was living carefreely. To think that such a battle was happening during that period.

I had no words.

"I had some suspicions beforehand about Jikoku-san. When I notified him of Mr. Fox's surrender, he gave me a strange response, not totally being convinced."

I peeped into it a little, she said.

"Albeit both being *Cursing Names*, Jikoku-san was slightly different from Raichi-san—actually, you could say that Raichi-san was too virtuous for a *Cursing Name*, for a *Kino*."

"That—might be true."

Although Kino-san released a *disease* on Miiko-san—he should have had more virulent *diseases* laying around, had he wished to use them. Of course, that's only in hindsight...Izumu-kun felt more threatened by the name *Kino* than *Tokinomiya*, but that was without taking his personality into account—no, if I had to comment from my position, Jikoku-san and Kino-san were basically the

same deal.

Hmm...

"...But I don't think that explanation justifies that incident in the Imperial Garden, though. Why on earth did I have to be assaulted by you three?"

"After contacting Migishita-san, I had to chase after the escaped Jikoku-san independently. But even I wasn't so full of myself as to think I could measure against a *Cursing Name* alone. I need assistance from other people."

"And they were Misora-chan and Takami-chan?"

Yes, she acquiesced.

"Misora-san and Takami-san were next on the list of targets I had to monitor—there was that, but also that they deeply despise you since the incident with Izumu-kun at the Sumiyuri Academy. It also seemed like Mr. Fox's sincerity didn't quite get through to them."

"They were fanatical, right?"

"Yes. More fanatical than loyal. As expected of the Nonsense User-san, he manages to find fitting words. Even then, until then, I did my best to not let them lay a hand on you."

"...Thank you very much, though I don't think this a situation where I should express my gratitude—"

"Right. In order to have Misora-san and Takami-san *cooperate* with me on Jikoku-san's capture—I ultimately had to use you."

In this person's case—

She was neither loyal nor fanatical, I guess.

I don't know if it could be applied here, but...

One would find the word "resourceful".

Very fitting for her.

"When I asked for assistance from Misora-san and

Takami-san—they were in the midst of torturing Furuyari-san. Ah, as you are aware, I'm talking about the twelfth one."

"..."

"About Furuyari-san's *betrayal*... About her having a secret entente with you, honestly, it was evident to me and not something worth especially monitoring—even for Mr. Fox, it was the same. Rather, Mr. Fox had a plan relying on that aspect of the twelfth generation Furuyari Zukin—but there were about two idiots unable to comprehend that."

"Well...for you professionals, her betrayal was completely and thoroughly seen through."

"To be frank, it hurts my feelings," Konomi-san said. "With the war against you already over...there was no reason to go so far over such a normal girl. I am not too fond of that."

"..."

Even—if those were her real thoughts.

Those words failed to convince me.

Konomi-san continued.

"At that time, my attention was too focused on Jikoku-san—my direct monitoring of the Miotsukushi Sisters was simply lacking. And the twelfth Furuyari-san wasn't even on my watch... Also, Misora-san and Takami-san extracted a capital piece of information from Furuyari-san."

"Her meeting with me at the Imperial Garden—right."

On the thirty-first of October—9AM.

At the Imperial Garden—handing her the Unsigned.

"Unlike you, persuading people with words isn't my specialty—therefore I requested the Miotsukushi Sisters

to help me find Jikoku-san in exchange for helping them with that. Using Mr. Fox's name at times, of course."

"...Finally, I can comprehend now."

Now—

Every statement from Misora-chan and Takami-chan on that day made sense. The reason why, even though they were straying from Mr. Fox's orders, Konomi-san, who was the most trusted by him, was cooperating with them—

"You could say I was responsible for instigating their vigilance towards you—but at that point, I couldn't expect the Story to take such a turn."

"..."

Then, as I thought, Konomi-san didn't mind if I was killed by the Miotsukushi Sisters in that garden...

I felt like I finally reached that "nasty personality" Izumu-kun was talking about.

Saying she didn't choose the means to accomplish her goals, that she always chose the shortest route, might sound good, but...

Her character might have been overlapping with mine.

"My, please. Don't get the wrong idea—ever since Mr. Fox said 'Don't get involved with my enemy any longer,' I took measures to at least keep you from dying. In reality, I was the one to contact Utage-san."

"...Heeh."

Having *created a space* inside the Imperial Garden, she also did whatever possible to keep me from going there. She only didn't make it in time—because Utage Kudan was Shigai Touno... Aah, I see. Then that became an opportunity for Touno-san—although late, she still informed me about Kunagisa.

From what Zerozaki heard from Touno-san, she knew nothing about the *Space Creator*—Konomi-san, but that would mean Konomi-san used her favorite *Space Creation* to make Touno-san the *Imaginary Weapon* move without her knowing—I guess.

It was all entangled...

Or packed, I should say.

Naturally, from Konomi-san's perspective, even if Touno-san failed to stop me from going to the Imperial Garden, she knew that Magokoro was inside the apartment—although it was just a coincidence that Zerozaki was the one rescue me—though it was just a coincidence, even if that didn't happen, Magokoro would have been the one to come.

That being said—

That was surely a dangerous bet.

Since that scene was only a few hours before the Thought Manipulation to *release* Magokoro activated—that was a bold way of thinking, like passing a string through a needle, no, even more, like passing a string through a bed of needles. She probably also thought it would be for the best to have Touno-san protect Magokoro before Rurero-san's arrival, but—what was now clear was that, before being Utage Kudan, Touno-san was a member of *Team*. Did Konomi-san know that at that point? If she did know... No, rather, if she didn't know—I guess? Of course, in the worst case scenario, Konomi-san would be satisfied with just ensuring Mr. Fox's safety, so no matter whether Touno-san made it in time or not, no matter what state Magokoro was in, and needless to say, no matter whether I got killed or not, ultimately, she didn't care.

In other words, everything was set up so that, no matter how things rolled out, her first priority would always be achieved.

Umm...

Nasty...

"To Misora-san and Takami-san, I made them swear on Mr. Fox's name that 'There was only one chance. Whether they succeed or not, the next step was searching for Jikoku-san'. Just in case, I cast *Space Creation* on them, so if anyone came to the rescue, I intended to stop them on the spot."

"Then... Just making the alarm bell ring was enough, in this case?"

"Exactly. It's no good, you have to carry out your intention. Having fooled the Niounomiya Siblings, what are you doing being fooled by the Miotsukushi Sisters?"

"Yeah..."

"That being said—that Demonic Killer broke through my *Space Creation* without any trouble—although the effect was dimmer due to the large area it covered... No, that shouldn't matter now. That kind of case exists. If there is a next time, I will do better then," Konomi-san said. "Aah, but be at ease—I have told Misora-san and Takami-san to refrain from attacking you again."

"Thank you for that. That is, if they really do follow your instructions, though... So, what are those two doing now?"

"With Jikoku-san being captured, Ichirizuka Konomi's role is also over. So I told those two to go back to the Saitou Clinic and guard Mr. Fox. I have no proof, but they probably obeyed."

"...You're using the other *Thirteen Stairs*—and even

myself like your pawns, Konomi-san. Is that because of your leadership? That reminds me a little of an old acquaintance."

"Do you mean Hagihara Shiogi-san?"

Even though I stayed ambiguous, she hit the bullseye.

It felt like a waste.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I also come from Sumiyuri Academy—although I was expelled in my second year of highschool due to misbehavior."

"Expelled? Heeeh—"

If I remember correctly—

Being expelled from that academy should have been the equivalent of being put on a wanted list. Hime-chan wasn't an exception either...

"When the chairman changed a few years back, I heard the system underwent quite a few changes... But even then, I heard the praise for Hagihara Shiogi-san. Mr. Fox too was fervent about her case. I did have some curiosity myself. After all, I was part of Sumiyuri Academy's strategic section."

Although I didn't reach the position of strategist, Konomi-san added with a smile.

Even if she smiled, I didn't know how to take it.

"Ah, it's here."

Crossing the lights on Karasuma Street, having walked a few dozen meters more—Konomi-san's feet stopped.

There was a building.

A large building able to accomodate a large company office. What Konomi-san pointed at was the sort of brand new building with mirror-like glass walls.

"...Is Tokinomiya Jikoku—confined here?"

"'Confined' makes me sound like a bad person. I am

not too fond of that."

"Then, under house arrest?"

"That should be about right. As expected of the Nonsense User."

"Please don't repeat 'as expected' so many times—I am similar to you in the sense that I hate being overestimated."

"Our characters overlap, right?"

"From the conversation we exchanged up to now, I will admit that. You shouldn't say it too openly. Normally, it should be embarrassing to have your character overlap with other people. Setting that aside, however—being under arrest in such a modern building on a big street... Isn't that too unreasonable? You can't know when it might be exposed. And there's a ton of people too."

"On the fourth floor there is a dead space, a room somewhat too narrow for office usage—I used my *Space Creation* there and isolated it. It seems it was originally one of Jikoku-san's hiding spots, but—trying to hide *Space* from me, even if he is a *Tokinomiya* and a *Cursing Name*, that's a prime example of underestimating your opponent."

"Heeh—"

In other words, even if Tokinomiya Jikoku managed to escape from that room—he was restrained there from the outside by Konomi-san and the Miotukushi Sisters. As the person in question said, since her strength was insufficient alone, she used the Miotsukushi Sisters to the utmost with a technique similar to the famous aiki[3]... Well...although I don't want to admit it, I guess that means if they're used correctly, the Miotsukushi Sisters aren't just a nuisance...

Huh, hey, hold on.

These two returning to the Saitou Clinic meant—they would bump into Zerozaki, no?

That was a bit...I wonder.

Well, Mr. Fox and Aikawa-san were there, so it shouldn't become a big deal...

"Is something the matter?"

"No... Then, we don't have time, so—"

I checked my watch.

30 past 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

It's not like we had a time limit, but—

"For starters, I will do my usual impromptu performance and talk with him."

"Yes. From here on out it's your territory."

Konomi-san said.

"I'm leaving it to you."

2

Tokinomiya Jikoku—

That reminded me, no one had yet to tell me anything about his appearance, so I couldn't confirm for sure that it was him—however, inside this room with only the minimum amount of furniture to live, he, squatting on the floor with both hands handcuffed to a giant nail stabbed into the floor, unable to make a single move, was the only human inside this room, so—

I was sure he was Tokinomiya Jikoku.

Even though I said handcuffs, they were not that special.

With only that level of restraint, certainly, the phrase "under arrest" qualified best—but, since he couldn't escape, there was no doubt Jikoku-san had no combat ability, like Konomi-san and me.

You could see traces of torture left on Jikoku-san's body. That was probably the Miotsukushi Sisters' doing. The same kinds of wounds as on Zukin-chan's body. However, Jikoku-san—he didn't seem bothered by them.

No, I was sure torture was meaningless on him.

He probably—

Before even requiring torture, before even being asked, confessed to everything on his own.

In that sense, he didn't have any claims or opinions—

Nothing he should have been protecting.

His eyes were blindfolded with a towel, but—

He immediately noticed when I entered the room,

"Aah."

He said.

"—Hello."

"You are—I see, *Ii-chan*, right? It seems we both already know each other too well for introductions to be necessary, but it should be fine. That is necessary to be courteous. I'm more mindful of rules than anything."

Then, Tokinomiya Jikoku named himself.

"Sixth step of the *Thirteen Stairs*—Tokinomiya Jikoku."

"..."

"That being said, it has probably changed by a few steps by this point—also, no one would recognize me as one of the *Thirteen Stairs* anymore. I cannot help but associate the number *thirteen* with betrayal, but the fact that Judas was neither Utage-kun nor Magokoro-kun—but this very self, is an ironic result."

"Yes...probably."

Emoto-san and Zukin-chan, even Rurero-san—in that sense, weren't traitors. Although they betrayed the fox-masked man in many ways—they didn't rebel in the same way as Jikoku-san.

Even the betrayal was in the contract.

That person—was without a doubt, Judas.

"...I want you to remove my blindfold."

"Eh?"

"I just want to see your face—isn't it fine, just that much?"

"...I'm very sorry, but—I've already been warned by Konomi-san. About the fact that, against an amateur, just by making eye contact—you could use your Thought Manipulation."

"What, she found me out. That's utterly vexing."

Jikoku-san said, without a hint of remorse.

Smiling with loads of leeway.

"That said—if you truly are *Ii-chan*, then techniques like instant hypnosis wouldn't work on you, though—I am weak against people with a strong heart."

"..."

"You probably think your heart isn't strong, but that's wrong—"

"Please stop, Jikoku-san," I said. "It might be different with other methods, but at least when it comes to words, your techniques won't work on me."

"...The Nonsense User, huh."

"Well, that's about right."

I—

Closed the door behind me and leaned back on it. Five meters. Leaving that much of a distance between us—well, that should probably be fine.

There were no worries about anyone bothering us.

Konomi-san should've been casting *Space Creation* from the outside so that no hindrance could enter.

I could face the Thought Manipulator—

As much as I wanted.

"So...Jikoku-san. Now, to what extent do you understand what is happening in the world—the current situation?"

"Unfortunately, it's unfair to ask me that. That's harassment. The Miotsukushi Sisters, Misora-kun and Takami-kun, are lacking in the ability to explain things to people, so I was just beaten up one-sidedly—however, if even then, if even then you say it's fine, then I have a guess. For not just Misora-kun and Takami-kun—not just Konomi-kun, but *Ii-chan* to appear in front of me like this."

"..."

"So Mr. Fox chose to form a common front with you, huh—It's certainly fitting of him. However, from my position, it's disappointing. I thought Mr. Fox would be overjoyed, after all."

"Overjoyed—you say?"

"Didn't I make the *world's end* he wished for a reality? What could he be dissatisfied about?"

"Magokoro's rampage probably isn't the *world's end* that Mr. Fox wished for—for instance, you at least should get that he didn't wish for an *end* where a nuclear weapon would sweep over the earth, right? Magokoro's rampage is surely an extension of that—"

"It's not a rampage. It's a liberation."

Jikoku-san corrected my words with strong emotion in his voice, as if he would never concede on that point.

"...You must be thinking that a group using Thought Manipulation are just a fishy good-for-nothing bunch who can't be trusted, right?"

"I won't deny it."

"Yeah, I won't either. In reality, the people from the place I was born, *Tokinomiya*, all have indecent personalities—even myself, I have no intention of claiming to have an upright personality. I won't. But—even then, it's true that I felt pity for the Orange Seed."

"...Pity."

That was—

I'm sure, something...I thought, too.

On the other side of the sea, in the ER3 System's ER3 Program—saying I didn't feel anything towards Omokage Magokoro, with whom I shared a room—would surely be a lie.

A downright lie.

Although it was vague.

I had pity for her.

Therefore—

I opened—her lock.

...

Then, what?

Did that mean that, at that time, **I'd really done the exact same thing** as Jikoku to Magokoro?

Magokoro dying inside a bright red deflagration—

Inside a red, deep red, crimson, deep crimson deflagration was without a doubt my fault—but did Jikoku-san's actions, at least from what you could criticize, hold no different meaning than mine?

No...

That was evident from the get go.

I understood it in the bottom of my heart.

Therefore—

I had to do something.

I had to—save Magokoro.

Her—Omokage Magokoro.

Who became a replacement for Kunagisa—

By my hands.

"To clear up that misunderstanding from earlier—Mr. Fox and I are currently not putting up a common front—not even an alliance. I have no doubt you are aware that the war between Mr. Fox and I is already over—but now, we simply are fellow targets of Omokage Magokoro, who chose the same hiding spot."

"Heeh... Is that so?"

That's fascinating, Jikoku-san said.

Even while blindfolded and restrained by handcuffs—him having a normal, totally casual demeanor was as expected from that person—he probably didn't see me as a threat in this situation.

No, not exactly...

In the first place, Jikoku-san was someone ruling over fear—ruling over *the mind*.

He was already far from that stage.

He looked down at that state of mind from above.

Fear wasn't something to feel, but to manipulate, huh.

"In reality—when Konomi-san contacted him to inform us of your capture, Mr. Fox was unresponsive to a surprising degree. As if that kind of thing—was worthless and inconsequential."

"Isn't that obvious—after all, I was merely one of the thirteen limbs. One of your two hands would be precious, but if you have thirteen, then one isn't a big deal."

"That's why—this is my selfish action. Because I wanted to talk to you a little."

Getting the fox-masked man—

And Konomi-san's cooperation.

On a completely unrelated note to the deal I brought up to the fox-masked man the day prior—with a totally unrelated motive—I came here.

Only to talk with Tokinomiya Jikoku.

In reality—it was not like I'd planned anything. It was as Konomi-san said, an impromptu performance—rather, as for my feelings, it was closer to a rush job. Emoto-san and Rurero-san both told me "You shouldn't do it." It seems that actively trying to get involved with a *Cursing Name* was that far off the norm.

However—

Somehow, instinctively.

Even if I was not really willing to do it, even if I was reluctant—I felt like I had to talk with Jikoku-san.

About Magokoro.

Zerozaki and Aikawa-san proposed to come with me—and I was grateful for that. However, I wanted those two to solidify the defense, so I firmly excused myself.

If it was just me, it would've been another story, but—

I didn't want Magokoro to kill off Saitou Takashi.

If she did—I think it would be the end.

Not of the world or the Story-

Magokoro would end.

The fox-masked would probably have said she already had ended, but—if there was any possibility otherwise, I wanted to aim for it. That's what I thought then.

For me, having lost my sister,

Having lost Kunagisa-

Now, only Magokoro was left.

"—Saitou Takashi."

Jikoku-san said.

"Ever since he invited me into the *Thirteen Stairs*—I have thought one thing. That no matter how many hands he pulled, no matter how many *limbs* he pulled, he would probably never achieve his objective—that he was a lost child."

"...Lost child?"

"Someone with a poor sense of direction would be more fitting than a lost child. Like a stubborn child, bad at giving up. Originally—ten years ago, when he failed at Overkill Red's creation, he should have given up on everything."

"..."

"Like a wraith. Don't you think so too, *Ii-chan*? He's at a point where any normal person would have already given up—that's why, I felt intuitively, Saitou Takashi is probably worse than anyone else—however, therefore, he will never reach his goal, for all eternity. Nonsense User, as someone manipulating words, someone who manipulates words, you should know that 'eternity' isn't the sort of word that ends in just four syllables, right?"

"Unfortunately my speciality is literally nonsense, you see—I have no idea about true meanings. ...So then, you accepted to go under his lead—even though you understood he would never achieve his goal?"

"In short, yes. ...In what way did Mr. Fox describe me?"

"Among the *Thirteen Stairs*, the only man who truly, simply, with no distraction, wished for the *world's end*—that's what he called you. In other words—in addition to being a single *limb* from the *Thirteen Stairs*, you might have been his only companion."

"I see."

"I'm sure Mr. Fox should be in shock, being betrayed by you. He's not someone to talk begrudgingly about people—but he doesn't hide his dejection either."

"That's wrong—didn't I tell you? I'm just one of the limbs. There is no way he would get dejected for my sake. Didn't you say so too?"

"I only talked about his reaction when you were captured. Well, though he also looked tranquil when you betrayed him. But—he acted in a dejected way about the results you produced. That is certain. Like 'will it really end with something like that?'"

"I have no way to make a judgement on that. However, if I had to say—it's as you said just earlier. He probably

hated it. That I defined the Orange Seed—as the world's end."

"Since he is someone who won't repeat anything twice, be it a success or a failure."

"Not that, not just that. Ten years ago, since he got expelled from causality by the means he used—that should have been the first means he couldn't allow himself to use, no matter what. That's why, part of it was me doing it in his stead—as I thought, he was a let-down. A real let down. If he really was dejected, that is. I thought he would enjoy it, though."

"From your perspective—was Magokoro that pitiable?"

"Rather than pitiable—saying that she invites an emotion of compassion would be the truth. The truth. The same feeling as when gazing at a lion inside a cage—in the first place, even though it's called Thought Manipulation, I have always been better at releasing than dominating. From the roots, my nature was that of choosing the simplest means. That's also why I received the name *Tokinomiya Jikoku* though—"

"..."

"Then, what would happen, I wonder. He himself, Saitou Takashi himself—isn't he already something worthy of being called the *world's end*? Just by appearing, he represents the Story, as a Killer Character. Back Nozzle and Jail Alternative and Dying Epilogue—all might have been pointing towards Saitou Takashi. Then, he would really be a wraith."

"...The word wraith is too fitting, right? After all, he was killed by his real daughter ten years ago."

"That daughter, too, should have originally died ten

years ago."

"Right."

"Nonsense User. Have you ever died?"

"Who knows... For what it's worth, I think I'm still alive—and I recently decided I would also live in the future—I wonder. Maybe I died a long time ago. Like six years ago, for example."

"If that's the case, you are a wraith. ...The remaining life of anyone who's already died once—it's nothing but a fight against their own self. They can no longer interfere with the world. They have been severed from causality. Therefore, Mr. Fox's way of thinking—it was wrong on a fundamental point."

"...And?"

"Therefore, I belonged to the *Thirteen Stairs*—and my wish was, as Mr. Fox said, the *end of the world*. However, a beautiful word such as 'companion' doesn't fit me. I only used Mr. Fox—and the rest of the *Thirteen Stairs*."

The fox-masked man said that too. That, as much as Tokinomiya Jikoku was Saitou Takashi's limb, Saitou Takashi was also Tokinomiya Jikoku's limb.

Of course, had the fox-masked man won the match against me—and achieved the end of the world, that in itself would have been consummate for Jikoku-san.

"Is that so... Honestly, even when I shove it right in his face, does the Orange Seed differ that much from the *end of the world* for Mr. Fox...? Does he hate it that much? It's a mystery. Well—however, regardless of whether Mr. Fox agrees or disagrees—the end is already the end. I'm sure the released Orange Seed—the Orange Seed released from oppression will kill you all."

"..."

"Without destroying you all her self wouldn't get established. Even the Orange Seed herself is a wraith."

Wraith.

That I—killed.

That Saitou Takashi birthed, that the ER3 raised, and that I killed.

"...I will get straight to the point."

I said to Jikoku-san.

"The Thought Manipulation of *release* you put on Magokoro—is there any way to dispel it?"

"None."

Without a moment's hesitation—he affirmed it instantly.

Without leaving an ounce of ambiguity.

"Even for myself—no, even if you brought the most skilled *Tokinomiya*—removing the Thought Manipulation cast on the Orange Seed is impossible. I didn't cast Thought Manipulation with such a half-hearted will."

"..."

"Even if my own body were to be shredded. I tried to make the *end of the world* a reality by my own means—that's what I resolved myself to do. Therefore, in order to not let my will waver, I reinforced the strength to a level where the *technique* wouldn't ever be loosened. I constructed it meticulously, like a spider's nest, then cast it. There's no way to remove it, nor any way to destroy it either."

"...Is that so..."

To be honest—that's pretty much what I expected.

I thought that, even though it was something that would go on forever as long as her heart was working, that even though it was a spell constantly being cast—that

even then, the person having done it might have known a way to dispel it—but I guess it wouldn't be a soft turn of events like that time I asked for a way to dispel the three chains, huh.

It wouldn't all go conveniently, huh.

Utterly regrettable.

"Then—what should I do?"

"Um?"

Jikoku-san showed a puzzled expression.

Without caring, I doubled down on my question.

"How exactly should I—save Magokoro?"

"..."

"I don't care about the end of the world or the end of the Story anymore. In these last three months—ever since I met Mr. Fox, I have been thinking about it somewhere in my heart—I have been thinking about it, but... No answer came forth. But even then, only one thing got cleared up—that kind of problem was outside of my realm."

"I know very well that saying to run away is the Nonsense User's run-of-the-mill trick."

"It's not that—it's just, it seems like fruitless efforts. The attempts to end the world—I can only hear your and Mr. Fox's words as wasted efforts. I mean—"

I said.

"The world, it just doesn't end, does it?"

"...Doesn't end."

"No matter how you think about it, it doesn't end—this world that didn't end, not even after the 4000 year war named 'killing each other continuously', it's not going to end with just a brawl of ten or twelve people. Even if humanity perishes, the Earth remains. Even if the

Earth splits into pieces, space remains. Even if space disappears, time continues. In the end, all you can end is just each and everyone's individual worlds, right? I don't remember exactly when, but Mr. Fox presented an idea that denied people's individual worlds—but they do exist. Your very own world."

Then—

I said while recalling various memories.

"Until now, I have asked various people—'In your view, what is the end of the world?', but...their answers were beautifully all over the place. There are as many ends as there are worlds. If that's not a question where there are correct and incorrect answers—wouldn't that mean that there are an infinite amount of worlds? What Mr. Fox is trying to end—and what you are trying to end is just a fragment—your own personal world, isn't it?"

"...How unpleasant."

Jikoku-san—

For the first time, replied to me without any leeway in his voice.

"Of all things, do you intend to treat Mr. Fox and me—as the frogs in the well?"

"Had you remained in place inside the well, you would have been harmless—but since you went to the ocean and still say the same thing, I'm saying you're a bother. At the very least, for me."

Kunagisa Tomo.

Omokage Magokoro.

And perhaps Aikawa Jun—

"The kind of end that can be brought about by trying to control a single, tiny existence—it can’t be a big deal, I think."

"...Treating The Orange Seed and Overkill Red as tiny existences, huh? There's a limit to how preposterous you can get. How preposterous, really. You really don't know your place."

"That's fine by me. ...I will ask again, Jikoku-san. What should I do in order to save Magokoro? If you can think of anything—please tell me."

"I don't know. The only possible answer I can give is that there's no such way. Because, in reality, there isn't.

"...Is that so?"

I distanced my back from the door.

Loosened the arms I had crossed.

The palms of my hands—they were drenched in tense sweat.

My mouth was parched.

"Then—we're done here. It was only for a few minutes, but I'm glad I was able to talk to you. Thank you very much."

"Um?"

"Because I feel like I grasped a hint."

I quietly walked up to Jikoku-san. As expected of someone from the underworld, he slightly raised his body, having felt my presence. Although since he was restrained by the handcuffs, that had almost no meaning to it.

I stopped my feet one step before Jikoku-san, extended my hand, and removed the cloth blinding him.

Jikoku-san's eyes lit up.

The first light he'd seen in a while—

Jikoku-san blinked because of the brightness.

Still holding the cloth in my hands, I fixed Jikoku-san's head—and forcefully made our eyes align.

Made our eyes—align.

"...!"

"I'm not like you all—it doesn't matter how much I struggle, it doesn't matter how I wish for it—I cannot end the world. I'm a man who couldn't even properly kill one person, who couldn't even properly break one person. Therefore, killing the world, breaking the world, and furthermore, ending the world—isn't possible.

"But, I can save the world.

"I decided—I will become an ally of justice."

"...You—my...technique."

"**You were the one who said it wouldn't work, weren't you?**"

"...!"

"**Something like your lowly technique is nothing to me**."

Live the rest of your life—

In fear of me.

"**You are very weak**."

I took my hands off Jikoku-san's head.

Then, I showed him my back.

Opened the door,

And exited—that room.

Of course, there weren't any parting words.

I sighed.

As I thought—as everyone said, a large part of me still thinks I shouldn't have come here—however, as I said earlier, the feeling of having grasped a hint—it was certain.

Magokoro.

The Thought Manipulation cast on Magokoro.

"Thank you for the work."

Having gone out of the building—

I was welcomed by Konomi-san, who had waited there.

"How did it go?"

"I don't have enough results to be worthy of a report. ...From here on, what will happen to Jikoku-san?"

"What?"

"Rather than 'what will happen'—'what will you do' might be the better question."

"Aah. Be at ease about that point," Konomi-san said. "We have been enemies until just recently, so it's no wonder for you to feel worried, but—at the very least, I don't have such violent thoughts. I will not insist on making Jikoku-san pay for having betrayed us. I am not too fond of that."

"..."

"That said, the fanatical Miotsukushi Sisters probably want to kill him—I will do my best to avoid that swiftly. If you'd be willing to, could I ask you to teach me your nonsense for that purpose?"

"It's impossible for me to entice those sisters—I've already failed once, so I don't have any motivation left. If you really insist, I will do it though."

"It's not like we have any choice after all. Once we go back to the clinic, they will be there—although, as Mr. Fox said, for me, enticing you would be even more difficult."

"I am grateful for your praise. A part of me thinks that, if you were there, you would have had no need for Noise-kun, but...winning over your heart might take a hundred years."

"If you try to win me over that fervently, even I will concede, though."

Konomi-san said as a joke, and laughed.

"Setting that aside—well, let me see. About how to deal with Jikoku-san next—naturally, we'll make him leave the *Thirteen Stairs, but*...umm, after having gotten every piece of information we can out of him, we will make him unable to use his Thought Manipulation ever again, then free him, I guess. If we go by the book."

"Aah, if it's about that there's no need to worry—he will probably already be unable to use it."

"What?"

"Eyes that can't see anything, the surface of the eyeballs is merely something like a mirror, so—ah, no, nothing."

"...?"

Konomi-san curiously tilted her head.

Immediately straightened herself,

"What are you going to do now?"

And asked me that.

Good adaptability.

"Ah, err, let me see. If you're fine with it, Konomi-san, how about going for a meal together?"

"I didn't mean it that way."

I was swiftly dodged.

Actually, I was flat out rejected.

It was a shock.

"We probably won't be able to remove the Thought Manipulation cast on Magokoro-san. I think that was already brought to light, though."

"...What. So you already knew?"

"No, but I could at least predict that. After all, Jikoku-san has been an acquaintance of mine since before joining the *Thirteen Stairs*."

"Heeh..."

"If he were simply to cause harm to Mr. Fox, I would have quickly eliminated him—but his ideals were closer to Mr. Fox's than mine—"

"You...really love Mr. Fox, huh."

"My, please. How embarrassing."

Konomi-san smiled shily.

Izumu-kun used the word "admiration", but—

This should be called love.

Neither loyalty nor fanaticism.

That's how I thought.

I see, so among the *Thirteen Stairs*, where the seats are hard to replace or fill—I felt like I understood why she had been able to constantly remain the *second step*.

Love.

More than fanaticism—even more irredeemable.

"...About the plans for the future..."

"Ah, yes. What to do, I wonder. If you want to return to the Saitou Clinic, I would like to accompany you, but—"

"Aah, about that. I intend to do that for starters, but...please, Konomi-san. Could you find Magokoro?"

"...Find? Magokoro-san?"

"Yes. I want...to talk to her."

"..."

Konomi-san fell silent for a moment.

Her hand on her chin, she made a thinking face.

"...I don't think it will have any meaning, though."

"I don't think you'll have much difficulty finding her—there's no way you can't spot that flashy orange hair since you were able to capture Jikoku-san the Thought Manipulator without much difficulty."

"However—then, you don't really have to request that of me...I would have had no choice for Mr. Fox's sake—"

"**In secret, without telling Mr. Fox**, please."

"..."

I thought she might have gotten angry—but instead, her face turned bewildered. As if she couldn't comprehend what I said.

I added an explanation.

"Please don't misunderstand—you can still do it for Mr. Fox's sake. I want you to keep it a secret from Mr. Fox—move sneakily. Then, I want you to help me meet Magokoro."

"...But, again—what's the purpose?"

"I want to talk to Magokoro. Somewhere without any hindrance—that's all."

"You will get killed."

Konomi-san replied without mercy.

"You should already know that, don't you?"

"No—now, having talked to Jikoku-san—I noticed a slight feeling of discrepancy. That said, if you asked 'What about it?' it would be the end of that. It's really just a slight discomfort, but—"

"Let's hear it."

Konomi-san didn't say anything unnecessary, and replied on the spot.

Quite the quick decision making ability.

"If Magokoro—wasn't *on a rampage*, but *released*—I think there's something that cannot be explained. For instance, about the apartment being completely destroyed—what meaning do you think that had?"

"Meaning? Meaning, you say?"

"It's half-assed—the destruction is too minute to be completely left up to anger. Also—the question of why **only the apartment's premise** was destroyed contradicts

that. How would Konomi-san explain that point?"

"...Umm."

"A lot happened, so I wasn't able to go visit them, but—having only phoned an acquaintance nurse, the wounds everyone there had weren't anything serious. The damage is too small for it to be a *release*, that's a bottleneck. Well, yesterday, it was pretty sudden so my head wasn't working very well, but—even though there are only a few people able to make one whole building collapse—isn't Magokoro somewhat not up to the task? If Magokoro were truly released—it wouldn't have been weird for a whole neighbourhood to be erased."

"...If I remember correctly, I heard a story about an entire town being gone after a certain *Zerozaki* awoke, so—if you take that into account, yes, it certainly might be strange."

Hmm, Konomi-san said.

"However, that's still too weak to be called proof. It's far from well-built reasoning."

"Yes, for now it's just one bit of foreshadowing. It can't be called proof. But, I wonder whether that holds true in the next fact—**the fact that I am alive as we speak**."

"...Ah, yeah."

"Since Magokoro beat up Izumu-kun and Aikawa-san, you might think she specializes in physical force, but in reality, she is also pretty smart—to the point of not bringing any shame to the name of Humanity's Last. That's why, finding the position of the Saitou Clinic—it should be a trifling matter."

Even then—

Although more than 40 hours have passed since Magokoro's *release*, I'm still—alive.

And probably—Saitou Takashi too.

If she really intended to kill me or Saitou Takashi, Magokoro would have achieved that long ago. For Magokoro—that's as hard as passing an object from her right hand to her left.

"What could it mean...? That's—certainly...weird... You could call it abnormal."

"When you're on the side of the hunted, you don't often think of that, but—considering the hunter's side, Magokoro has no reason to be careful of us. What do you think about that, Konomi-san?"

"...For example—maybe she first aimed for the ER3 System's MS-2... No, that line of thinking would be too self-serving. Killing the closest ones first would be more logical, after all. If she were to put an order on her targets, it should be you, Mr. Fox, then the ER3 System. That would mean—errr, what could it mean...? ...From the start...she didn't intend to kill Mr. Fox or you...?"

She had no intention to kill.

The Orange Seed.

"Or."

I nodded.

It was probably true that an unbreakable technique was cast.

And that it was a release rather than a rampage.

But—

Even then, there still were some unclear points.

That was certain.

There was still—some ambiguity left.

"At the very least, for her actions—it's not yet necessary to say they don't make sense."

"That's probably—a thought Mr. Fox would not have."

"Is that so? Setting yesterday aside, I think he will notice soon. Though I didn't think of it until I talked to Jikoku-san—but, if it's Mr. Fox—"

"No, it's surely impossible."

Konomi-san said flatly.

"You're really ruthless..."

"No. It's not in that sense. That kind of thought... Without a clear, unclouded trust in Magokoro-san—it cannot be attained."

"..."

"Understood," Konomi-san said. "I shall accept your idea. In secrecy of Mr. Fox I shall begin the search for Magokoro-san. That said, Mr. Fox will probably notice it quickly, but—I will do my best for your contact with Magokoro-san to go flawlessly. I shall set up a date for you two."

"I rely on you, Space Creator-san."

"Please call me Konomi. To be honest, I am not too fond of that title—don't you think a title only composed of kanji, without any hiragana, feels too formal?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"So, what to do now?"

"Then, how about a meal together?"

Our date, all alone.

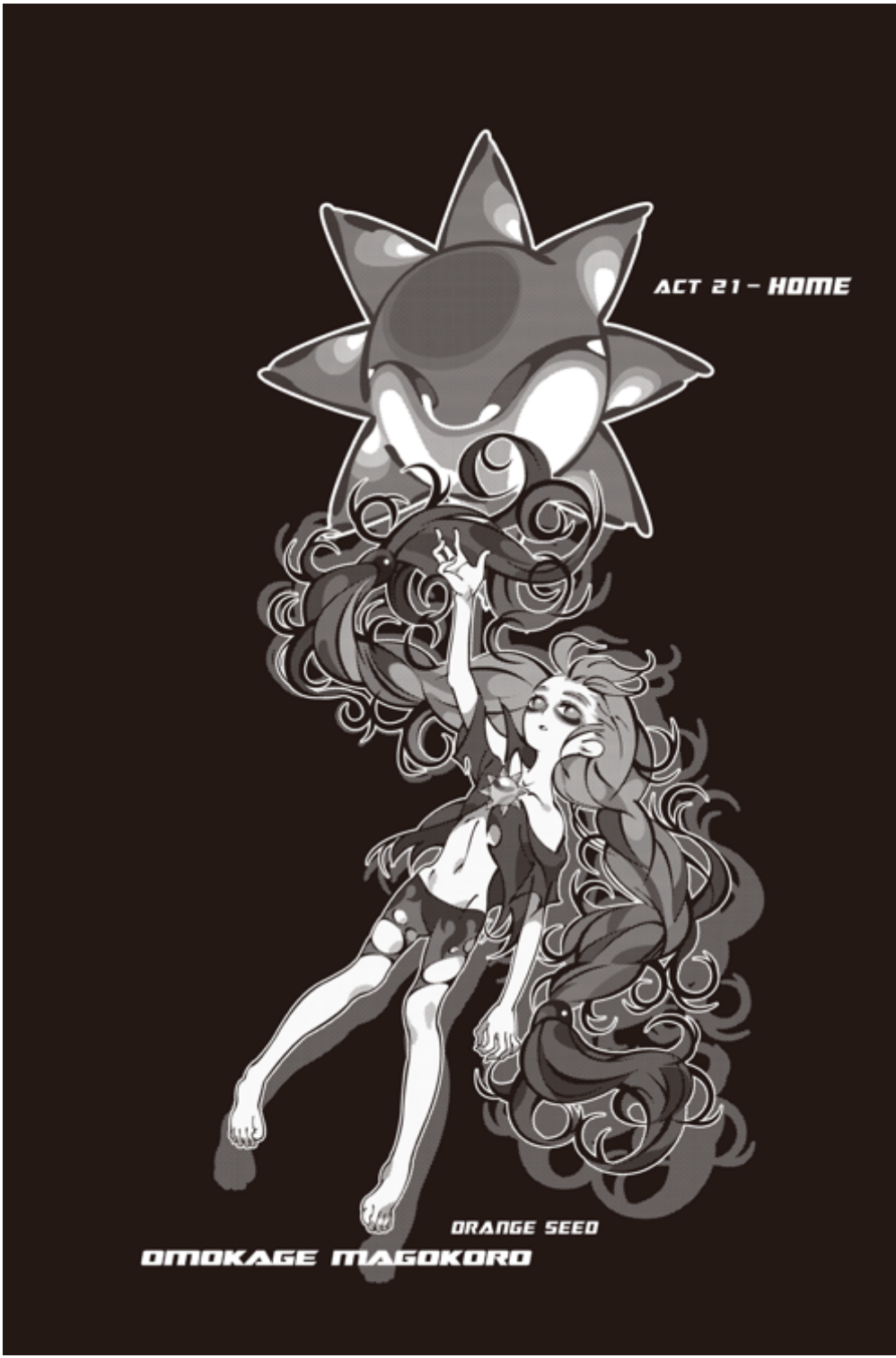
Our lonely date.

At that point—

In my heart.

I had made a resolution.

Somewhere deep inside my heart.


ACT 21 - HOME
ORANGE SEED
OMOKAGE MAGOKORO

0

They're no longer here.

1

The Thirteen Stairs.

Second - Kajou Akira.
Space Creator - Ichirizuka Konomi.
Doctor - Emoto Sonoki.
Imaginary Weapon - Utage Kudan.
Blacksmith - Furuyari Zukin.
Thought Manipulator - Tokinomiya Jikoku.
Puppeteer - Migishita Rurero.
Assassin - Yamiguchi Nureginu.
Professional Killer - Miotsukushi Misora.
Professional Killer - Miotsukushi Takami.
Dissonance - Noise.
Poison User - Kino Raichi.
The Orange Seed - Omokage Magokoro.

Thirteen henchmen.
Thirteen limbs.
Thirteen puppets.
Thirteen heretics.

At first, I'd been worried I wouldn't be able to handle them, that number which seemed so large—but after a mere month and a half, it had been reduced to an amount that almost couldn't pass as an organization anymore.

Withering the roots, breaking the branches.

Plucking the legs, crushing the head.

Kajou Akira didn't wasn't present in the first place—he was only living inside Saitou Takashi's heart.

Utage Kudan—Shigai Touno was more loyal to Kunagisa Tomo than to the fox-masked man from the start, and now that Kunagisa had parted ways with me—now that I parted with Kunagisa, there was no meaning to her obeying to the fox-masked man.

Furuyari Zukin, both the eleventh and the twelfth—deceased.

Death from old age and death from torture.

Tokinomiya Jikoku—dropped out.

Yamiguchi Nureginu—retreated.

Noise—dropped out.

Kino Raichi—deceased.

Omokage Magokoro—from the start, she wasn't one of the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Up to now, eight of the steps had already disappeared—

The third step, Emoto Sonoki, already lost her will to *end the world*, and the seventh step Migishita Rurero didn't quite drop out, but still required time before being able to return to the frontlines.

That means, the remaining ones were—

Ichirizuka Konomi and the Miotsukushi Sisters.

Thirteen Stairs—subtracting ten steps, three left.

With just three steps, it couldn't really be called a staircase anymore.

That's just a bump.

At most, a stepladder.

Only Konomi-san could be said to be a pain, but—in

the current state, even if the war with Mr. Fox resumed, I was confident I would win. In that sense, Konomi-san was certainly different from Noise-kun. I also knew that Zerozaki alone could handle the Miotsukushi Sisters—

That means the *Thirteen Stairs* were already as good as gone.

As good as erased.

That said, if there remained any problem, it would be Aikawa-san.

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's Strongest Contractor—Overkill Red.

Death Colored Crimson.

If I didn't clear up why she was still near the fox-masked man—I wouldn't be able to firmly assert the situation and prepare for it.

I didn't really mind it.

If they reconciled, it would be fine.

Asking them how they'd spent the second half of October together would've been too boorish—and I think the current situation is better than having a tragedy smeared with blood play out.

But—when was it again, right, in the case when Aikawa-san, Houko-chan, Moeta-kun and I went to Sumiyuri Academy's ruins to find the antidote for Miiko-san.

Moeta-kun asked Aikawa-san.

"Don't you want to meet your father?"

Aikawa-san answered.

She had always been searching for him—in order to kill him for sure this time.

But, I'd already thought about this once, but now it was evident that Aikawa-san wasn't the kind of person who

would kill for a personal grudge, for revenge.

In reality...she was a softie.

I could understand that from how she was friendly with someone like me (though I feel like she mostly caused trouble)—other than that, I have a lot of examples I can think of. At the very least, in terms of kindness, I didn't know anyone surpassing her.

Even in the story I heard from Zerozaki—that was the case.

On the night of November first, Zerozaki narrated to me, although reluctantly, how his second meeting with Aikawa-san had gone—that was a story so soft I got embarrassed just by hearing it. I now got why Zerozaki didn't want to talk about it.

Aikawa-san having no mercy against the *Killing Names*, the *Cursing Names*, and all other residents of that world—that was still definitely true. Even Zerozaki nearly got killed at that time, but—

His family.

Another member from the Zerozaki Clan that happened to be there by chance—the one Zerozaki called *her*, that *Zerozaki*—protected Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Seeing that, Aikawa-san apparently stopped attacking.

"**This kind of thing is no good**."

Saying something like that.

That's cheating, that's against the rules, that's cowardly, if you do something like that there's nothing I can do, is there—

She apparently said that, full of irritation.

After that, Aikawa-san made Zerozaki and that other *Zerozaki* swear that they would never kill anyone again—and left.

"What kind of wrong idea did she get about Demonic Killers? Is she stupid"—Zerozaki and that other *Zerozaki* thought that, but—

He was apparently still upholding that promise.

That meant he didn't spare the Miotsukushi Sisters at the Imperial Garden because I told him to, huh.

He used up all his knives—huh.

Well, even if I didn't really trust that story, I'd certainly heard it somewhere. However—soft.

Soft.

Too soft.

Even in the Weekly Shonen Jump, there haven't been stories that soft recently.

Thinking about it more, even when she confronted Izumu-kun, who was partially responsible for Hime-chan's death, she made it end in a draw—even when she crushed the Sumiyuri Academy in June, she didn't allow a single person to die, did she?

Aah, it was something I could have figured out just by thinking.

Why didn't I think about that sooner?

I didn't know about her ten years ago—

But there was no way her present self could kill anyone.

I'm sure there was no lie in those words.

She probably always went with that intent—when searching for Saitou Takashi. I'm sure she'd spent those ten years searching for the fox-masked man, to the point it could have become her identity.

Her father—

With whom ties had originally been cut.

But, even after meeting, he wouldn't be killed by her.

That kind person.

That's why—the doubt Moeta-kun harbored at that time was, in reality, right on the mark. No, setting that time aside, it shouldn't be a huge problem now. It wasn't like the time when we had to worry about the possibility of the fox-masked man, who'd detained the most important character—Aikawa Jun—in his hands, converting her to his side in the war—

Though it wasn't like that.

As I thought in the Imperial Garden, that day.

For Saitou Takashi—there wasn't any other *limb* easier to handle than Aikawa Jun. In the first place, they were *tools* and *limbs* for that purpose—if it went well, Aikawa-san should have been able to reach the end of the world, the end of the story, on her own.

What did he say back then again?

That at that time...causality nearly collapsed? Because he knew that was a mistake—although he knew, it was too late—then, Saitou Takashi died once. It seemed that Jikoku-san had a different interpretation of that, but at the end of my pondering, I concluded that that was the reason why the fox-masked man chose to welcome the end of the world with the Orange Seed's, Omokage Magokoro's *release*. Although that's it, there's still no explanation as to why that *end* was *worthless*...

Anyhow.

The important point was that the objective truth, which was that Aikawa Jun alone could replace the entirety of the *Thirteen Stairs*, didn't really serve my purpose well.

The possibility that Aikawa Jun and Saitou Takashi reconciled—like Moeta-kun, I found that exceedingly

dangerous.

"I'm glad that this family, which resented each other for a long time, finally made peace,"—summing it up like a cliche soap opera would be too normal for those characters of this Story.

Outdated.

Saitou Takashi—who called Aikawa-san "outdated".

That's why—

While waiting for Konomi-san's contact, I spent a bizarre life at the Saitou Clinic, Assistant Professor Kigamine's research facility—me, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, Emoto Sonoki, Migishita Rurero, Miotsukushi Misora, Miotsukushi Takami, Aikawa Jun, Saitou Takashi—among this bizarre lifestyle, what preoccupied me the most was —Aikawa-san's movements, which I naturally ended up following with my eyes.

Well, that wasn't all of it either.

For instance, since I was still resented as the one who made them lose face, the Miotsukushi Sisters used every possible opportunity to pick a fight with me (both came nagging at me at the same time so it was annoying). And on my side, against these two who were responsible for killing Zukin-chan—after torturing her, I couldn't quite forgive them, so...how should I say it, it was hard to deal with. As I thought, when they first returned to the clinic while I was in town, they had a quarrel with Zerozaki. I heard it ended up like last time, so it's not like that was the last nail in the coffin, but after that, they suddenly stopped attacking him.

By the way it seems these two didn't lead their daily lives wearing priest robes. Rather, that was like a fighting cloth to psych themselves up. During our cohabitation at

the Saitou Clinic, they wore off the shoulder clothes, miniskirts, and other things suitable for modern girls. You could say they were easy on the eye—but they weren't going easy on my life, so I couldn't approach them in a familiar manner. Although they reluctantly came back to ensure no danger befell the fox-masked man, these two, Misora-chan and Takami-chan, they still hadn't properly faced the fox-masked man—

It was complex.

It was entangled and entwined.

I once tried to ask them.

About why they killed Zukin-chan.

Both of them—

These two, seemingly didn't think anything of having killed her. They both tilted their heads, as if I was the only one saying strange things.

What are you saying?

What are you saying?

I don't get it.

I don't get it.

I don't get it, so I'll kill you.

I don't get it, so I'll kill you.

Even if I get it, I'll kill you.

Even if I get it, I'll kill you.

Aah...

Right.

We lived in different worlds—they were residents of an alternate world.

They carried different circumstances.

They carried different common sense.

Even before talking about fanaticism, before talking about the fox-masked man's sake, Misora-chan and

Takami-chan both—they didn't think anything of attacking someone else's life. They killed with the same logic as writing a sentence or using a calculator—professional killers.

Even killing me—it was nothing to them.

Even at the Imperial Garden.

Even now.

They didn't even think of it as violence.

They had totally different circumstances than Izumu-kun—

Than the Izumu-kun from when Rizumu-chan was still around.

That said, the reliable guy protecting me from Misora-chan and Takami-chan, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, managed to always cut down the discord between the Miotsukushi Sisters and me before it ever developed any further.

So, about Zerozaki, he was bad at dealing with Emoto-san. "That woman's ultra scary!" was what came out of Zerozaki's mouth the most. He said it more often than "What a masterpiece." That was certainly another bother. Of course, even without his apprehension towards Emoto-san, Zerozaki and Aikawa-san let out a strange atmosphere—the one loathed among the *Killing Names*, Zerozaki Hitoshiki, had seemingly always been bad at living in a group, so the cause of most problems came from Zerozaki. With the Miotsukushi Sisters present, I couldn't chase him out, so the hateful role of *Zerozaki-in-charge* was pushed onto me, but, well—that went for both of us.

Rurero-san led a therapeutic lifestyle.

Konomi-san searched for Magokoro. Everyday, she went out early in the morning and didn't return until late

at night—

Next, Aikawa Jun.

Aikawa-san didn't seem to do anything in particular—rather, it was like she was waiting for something and just normally contributed her part.

As expected, while performing a task, she was better than anyone.

Cleaning, laundry, cooking, groceries.

Even taking care of Rurero-san.

It would sound like a joke if I continued, but how should I put it—

She was seemingly unchanged from before.

As usual.

And that conversely created a sense of discomfort.

However, from what I could monitor, since that day, the first of November, except for when eating at the central table, Aikawa-san hardly talked to the fox-masked man.

She wasn't overtly ignoring him—but when you're at Aikawa-san's level, you can skilfully, naturally avoid the fox-masked man.

I didn't think that was a bad thing, but her acting normally during meals...was weird.

What on earth could be happening inside Aikawa-san's head?

By the way, during this cohabitation, the fox-masked man was the only one to achieve the great feat of not doing a single task.

I had to tell him "If you aren't doing anything, at least take the dishes out of the dishwasher," but it didn't have any effect. Even though Misora-chan and Takami-chan would at least clean the courtyard if I told them to...

Mr. Fox doesn't have to.

Mr. Fox doesn't have to.

You go work for Mr. Fox's share.

You go work for Mr. Fox's share.

When I went to ask them for advice, well, it went like that. As for Konomi-san, it was needless to ask her.

The fox-masked man's feelings were even more unclear than Aikawa-san's.

How did he see Magokoro—

How did he see the current situation?

Really, I couldn't figure it out.

Similarly to Aikawa-san, if I talked to him, he would behave as usual. I got into a few arguments with his arrogant, "king of the castle" attitude, but—

That was it.

That was really it.

It soon became too cold to just wear a swimsuit, so Emoto-san started wearing leg warmers and scarves. Her fashion sense, which became even more nonsensical, frightened Zerozaki. The sight of Zerozaki shivering in a corner of the room was funny, so I once tried to leave him alone without my assistance, but I was nearly killed later. After that, I helped him every time. As we were doing that, I realized that Emoto-san really had been a bully in her past.

With...all of that.

With all of that.

It kind of reminded me of the apartment before Magokoro demolished it—there were a lot of problems, and no shortage of troublemakers, but—

Honestly, it was fun.

That life—it continued for 10 days.

And that was—
My final time in tranquility.

"I found Magokoro-san."
I finally got the phone call from Konomi-san—the twelfth of November.
It was an unremarkable day.
Just a normal day, I thought.
"Try to pretend you're going on an errand... Let me see, head towards the place where you used to live, the grounds of that apartment."

2

"Honestly—I don't particularly want to brag about my ability, but I think no one else but me would have been able to find her."

At the place where the apartment collapsed—the scene I hadn't seen in a long time had become a clean vacant spot—that was the first thing Konomi-san, who was waiting for me there, said.

"Because Magokoro-san—she manufactured a space."

"...Eh?"

"As I said, Magokoro-san."

Konomi-san said.

"Ueeh, how shall I put it, it really feels like she stole my trademark."

"Your trademark... That shouldn't be something you can easily copy, right? That superpower—"

"Superpower... Who said such a thing?"

"Izumu-kun."

"... That's why I was bad with him—while being the one with inhuman strength, he treated everything else as supernatural. Space Creation is just a technique. Basically anyone can do it."

"Anyone?"

"As I said, it's similar to your nonsense."

"..."

"You don't seem convinced. I am not too fond of you making that face."

"But—erasing everyone from a train wagon, or moving the two middle people of a group of four walking in a diamond shape to another place—it's clearly not a normal

technique, is it?"

"There's a limit to people's cognitive abilities. That's why, if you surpass that limit—the space appears there by itself. A so-called blank of the mind."

"Blank of the mind? Isn't manipulating minds Jikoku-san's domain?"

"No, as I said, what I use isn't the mind but something outside of it. It would be easier to just show you... Errr, let me see. Then, let's say this is a service."

There, Konomi-san grabbed my right hand with both her hands as if preparing a palm reading—

Then let out a bright smile.

And pushed it right on her chest.

"...Ko-Konomi-san!"

"Done. Your mind just got filled with lewd thoughts. How filthy," Konomi-san freed my hand and said so in a very amused tone. "Now, how did it feel?"

"Eh, no, thinking calmly, it was the middle top part, so I didn't get to feel much—wait, no, that..."

"I was asking about your foot, which got stepped on."

"..."

"The principle is the same—in this case, the technique was focusing the opponent's attention on one point and making everything else blank. Well, when hearing a coin fall, anyone gets sensitive. At that moment, they become defenseless. It's the same impression."

"O-okay..."

Although there were probably many other comparisons...

I couldn't seem to understand her.

And in this person's case, she played out that *obscure* part on purpose, which made it even more of a hindrance.

A calculated ambiguity.

A highly computed mystery.

"Inversely, you can make someone's mind split its focus on everything else—and leave out a single point. Of course, when it came to vast places like the Imperial Garden, it was hard, you know? I spent my time making phone calls here and there."

"..."

It includes quite a lot of plain tasks, being a Space Creator.

Work on the backstage...

"In the subway too, it was the same thing—you were focused on Noise from the get go, so it was pretty simple. Rather, in reality, I was sitting right next to you that day."

"...Seriously?"

"This plain getup is also for that sake—in reality, I prefer things like goth loli. I also want to make my hair blond, but I'll wait to retire before doing that—I'm jealous of Emoto-san's free fashion. That said, in a sense, that's Space Creation in itself."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, after all, disguises are used when you don't feel like exposing your true self. So in reality, when confronted with her swimsuit and white blouse, her clothes' impression is so strong no one will pay attention to her nature at first, right?"

"Yeah, you have a point."

"That's a shell. For Emoto-san."

"..."

"Emoto-san wants it to be armor, but unfortunately, that kind of Space Creation isn't strong enough to not get smashed into pieces by just getting hit."

Huh...

Well, now I've gotten to know how Space Creation worked. In reality, it was probably much more complex, and in order to reach Konomi-san's level you'd have to go through many steps. But my temporary understanding was that it was akin to creating a *blank of the mind*, that simple expression was sufficient.

So it wasn't much of a superpower...

Rather, the same as Rurero-san's, it was just a technique.

For Izumu-kun, who required a simple and clear explanation for everything, no matter how it was explained to him, it couldn't be anything but a superpower in his mind. Also—in Konomi-san's case, what was frightening was that this *abnormality* didn't look like a *technique*... In Izumu-kun's eyes, she was probably really hard to deal with.

"Although I wasn't on bad terms with Rizumu-san. Her investigative prowess was extremely valuable for me."

"Yeah, Rizumu-chan was a girl who could be friendly with anyone. In front of her, the Nonsense User or the Space Creator stand no chance."

"...May I ask one thing?" Konomi-san changed her tone. "Concerning the Niounomiya Siblings, even if Rizumu-chan's existence is still in the range of tolerance —why did you forgive the Miotsukushi Sisters, I cannot understand that—"

"Forgive? If you're talking about them killing Zukin-chan—you're off the mark. I haven't forgiven them. I just currently have no choice so I'm cohabitating with them. Even for Izumu-kun—it's not like I'd forgiven him."

"No, it's a problem of meaning. Even if we use similar techniques, you and I stand at different positions—that's why I accepted your investigation request. However, seeing your attitude towards the Miotsukushi Sisters, I have some doubts."

"Doubts... Is it?"

"If," Konomi-san glanced at me fiercely and continued. "**If you are...feeling pity towards Miotsukushi Misora and Miotsukushi Takami, who were raised as professional killers**—that's wrong."

"..."

"No, it's fine to empathize with them—just empathizing is within your freedoms. However, forgiving them because of that would be wrong in my opinion," Konomi-san continued. "I mean—then, anything would become allowed, wouldn't it? If you forgive everything because of pity, nothing would get settled, would it?"

"...Konomi-san-"

"It's fine for me—because I am merely someone **from this side**. But...if you are trying to reason with us, I think that's wrong. Seeing the Miotsukushi Sisters, that Demonic Killer and you acting all friendly—makes me worried. Honestly, that sight—it's disgusting."

"I'm not trying to act friendly."

"Even then. If you intend to meet Magokoro-san with that spirit, I think that's wrong. Because that'd be something anyone else could do."

"...It's not like that. Konomi-san," I said. "Previously—I was told the same thing by a certain girl. That girl was Konomi-san's junior and Shiogi-chan's right hand. In other words—someone who **grew up in that kind of place**, a soldier and a berserker. To be frank—she wasn't sane.

Rather—she didn't possess anything like a personality. Just flimsily swaying between this world and the nirvana—that girl whimsically drifted towards the frontlines, and asked me. 'Do you have a reason that can stand up to all of ours for being here?' 'Just rejecting it, saying it's abnormal or unrealistic or something, that's cowardly.' 'Don't deny people so simply.' I just recently heard about it from Zerozaki, but...she very rarely spoke sentences of more than three lines that made sense to anyone."

Her, the one called Yamitsuki.

That girl—

I was probably the first ordinary person she'd ever seen.

"I don't have any," I clearly said. "Any reason that can stand up to Misora-chan's or Takami-chan's—any reason that can stand up to Zerozaki Hitoshiki's or Niounomiya Izumu's. I don't. I don't have a lack of reason that can stand up to their lack of reason."

"..."

"I don't understand. I don't understand, so—I can't complain. Jikoku-san said he pitied Magokoro—and I probably do so too, but at the very least—I cannot empathize with Misora-chan and Takami-chan. I don't even have a margin—for pity."

"...Now I'm convinced."

Konomi-san said, and nodded.

"Convinced?"

"Yes. **About why the Miotsukushi Sisters don't kill you**—"

"...?"

Um?

Isn't that just because Zerozaki is there?

"No, don't pay it much attention—I'm just talking to myself."

"Okay... Well, setting that aside. In the end, where was Magokoro?"

"Unexpectedly, nearby."

"Heh?"

"Kitano Tenmangu."

"..."

"It's just there."

That was indeed—

Like the distance between the nose and the mouth, not even ten minutes apart on a stroll. Certainly, that reminded me, in May, that was where Akiharu-kun—Usami Akiharu and I talked for the last time. Wasn't that precisely at Kitano Tenmangu?

"Honestly, it was a blind spot—it seems Magokoro-san was always there."

"Blind spot...so, a Space Creation?"

"It wasn't simply that, but the principle is the same. After all, I used my ability numerous times in front of Magokoro. She learned by watching and plagiarized it."

As expected of Humanity's Last—

Konomi-san said.

I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Good grief,"

"She has always been excellent at that—the so-called learning by watching. I'm just guessing, but when she demolished this apartment without leaving a trace, I think she used Izumu-kun's technique, *Eating One*. She can copy anything she's seen at least once."

Rather than a copy (reproduction), it's more of a complete (completion) though.

"Then—maybe even Thought Manipulation..."

"It's certainly possible."

As for Kino-san's *poison*, that was something he set up in his body beforehand, so it wasn't doable like the others, though.

"That's precisely the meaning of Humanity's Last. There is nothing that someone can do that Magokoro can't—that's what it is. Well, in a certain manga, she would be called an ultimate lifeform."

"Yeah. Although I don't know of this manga..."

"Eh?"

I was taken aback.

"What are you doing?"

"..."

Konomi-san was taken aback too.

Cough cough, I cleared my throat,

Konomi-san corrected her stance.

Constant adaptation.

Ready wits.

"Humanity's Last...not being the Worst or the Strongest, the manufactured Humanity's Last. However—then, something wouldn't quite make sense."

"What is it?"

"Why is Magokoro-san so small-built?"

"..."

Konomi-san didn't seem to be waiting for an answer—she was just wondering to herself, and so she continued.

"That was weird from the start—if she truly was the *last form*, the *complete form*, wouldn't something like Aikawa Jun's build be more appropriate? The length of those arms, the length of those legs... I was not informed of Overkill Red's exact age, but her outward appearance, mid twenties... Aren't the mid twenties a human's most

active period? Then the ideal appearance should be close to that—so why would Magokoro maintain a build that couldn't even pass as a teenager?"

"Isn't that just one of the unconscious limitations she put on herself? Apart from Magokoro, I have a friend—I had a friend who was similar. She stopped her own growth—to a complete halt. She was a foolish one—"

...Well, there was also the case of the triplet maids who didn't follow any such rules, but that had its own charm to it, so that one was fine.

"Anyhow—this might end up in a talk about topology, but I was able to find her in a mere ten days because I was the Space Creator. As someone used to creating space, I recognize where blank spots in the mind would be born."

"If they show their right hand, look at the left one, is it?"

That reminds me, when was it again, Kouta-san said something on the lines of "If you want to hide a tree, set it up in front of everyone," but in Konomi-san's case, she was probably well versed in both hiding it in the forest and in public view.

"Then shall we go? Kitano Tenmangu is pretty vast. Where exactly was she hiding? Was there even a rain shelter there?"

"I shall explain it on the way," Konomi-san said as she started walking. "How was everyone else behaving?"

"Aah—well, as usual. There wasn't anything special... But, I still can't tell what Aikawa-san and Mr. Fox are thinking. Especially Mr. Fox—I wonder what he thinks about Magokoro? Did you hear anything, Konomi-san?"

"I did ask, but it didn't go well. Rather—now, Mr. Fox might not care about anything."

"Isn't that his normal self?"

No matter what occurs, no matter what happens—

No matter what becomes, no matter what doesn't happen—

In the end, it's the same.

So everything—doesn't matter.

There is only one important thing—

"It's not that," Konomi-san said. "Even that one thing that should be important, the *end of the world*—he doesn't seem to care about it."

"...Eh?"

As expected—they had known each other for way longer.

Konomi-san was apparently able to read a clear difference from the fox-masked man's behavior as of the last ten days.

"As we thought, the shock was big—with Jikoku-san's betrayal. Since they shared the same goal."

"No, I don't think that's the case. A member of the *Thirteen Stairs* since its foundation is saying that, so it can't be wrong—anyway, in that sense, Mr. Fox has been constantly betrayed until now."

"..."

"He is first-rate in terms of bringing out the talents in someone, but, you know, given how his personality is, although he is good at seeing through people, he doesn't look at people. Even if this case was special... Mr. Fox isn't the type to be shaken by just Jikoku-san alone."

"Jikoku-san said that himself too, but—then, what didn't he like? Of course, it's not like he feels empty after his dream became reality... In the end, you haven't been ordered to *search for Magokoro* by Mr. Fox, have you,

Konomi-san?"

"Yes. Although I was surprised. He said something like 'If she's coming, she will come even if we leave her alone, no need to search for her.'...Aah."

And—

Then, Konomi-san stopped her legs and turned around to face me. She stared at my face for a while before starting to move again.

"...? What is it?"

"No—I think it's better to tell you beforehand so I'll say it. About Magokoro—your deduction was on the mark."

"Heh?"

"Magokoro-san—has no desire for revenge."

Konomi-san continued, still looking ahead.

"Not against Mr. Fox, nor against you—and of course, neither against the ER3 System, she is apparently—not thinking of revenge at all."

"...Did you perhaps have a talk with Magokoro?"

"No. She didn't escape after I came this close, so I didn't approach further than needed. After all, she has identified me. Even if I erased my presence, I couldn't really enter from the front gate where she could see me."

"But, then, how did you she—"

"At first glance."

Konomi-san said.

"**At first glance—it will be obvious**."

"...?"

"Aah, maybe Mr. Fox knew that... Although I'm just repeating what I told you last time, you could reach that answer only because you trusted Magokoro. That it was a thought Mr. Fox couldn't have... But if that was—self-

evident for Mr. Fox."

Not by trust—

If he just knew.

"Yes. However, I don't get why Magokoro ended up **like that**."

"You are...talking pretty vaguely, huh."

"Sorry...I'm also confused. I have no Space Creation trick for that," Konomi-san said. "Please tell me one thing, Nonsense User-san—meeting Magokoro-san, what do you intend to do? What do you intend to talk about?"

"Nothing much—just like with Jikoku-san, improvising. This one is just not a rush job," I answered. "Just, well...I simply want to save her..."

"Save, is it?"

"Yes—what about it?"

"Just wondering whether you can."

A streetlight.

A pedestrian crossing.

Beyond that—we could see the Kitano Tenmangu.

A big, giant torii.

After going through that...there would be Magokoro.

"That's where I stop."

"Eh?"

"Beyond here, please continue alone."

"...Err, is it because Magokoro—might use Thought Manipulation after learning it?"

When I met Jikoku-san, Konomi-san stayed outside for that reason—so maybe it was the same this time? However, Konomi-san swayed her head.

"It's not about whether she can use Thought Manipulation or not. I'm simply not involved in this—of

course, you can rely on me for not letting hindrances enter. For your date. However, since Magokoro-san herself can do it, it might be unnecessary... Yes, I'll admit it. Although I said a few things earlier...to be honest—I don't want to approach Magokoro-san."

"Why is that? Is it...dangerous?"

"No."

Konomi-san said.

"It's too painful, I don't want to look at it."

"..."

"No matter what you're going to talk about—Nonsense User-san. I recommend that you never create a blank in your mind. For your sake, and for Magokoro-san's sake."

The streetlight turned green.

Konomi-san didn't try to move.

She didn't try to say anything more.

Without having completely understood the meaning in Konomi-san's words—rather, having nearly not understood them—I took a step.

However.

A while after going through the torii and walking on the Kitano Tenmangu grounds—whether I wanted it or not, I would be forced to comprehend it.

I thought it might have been a corpse.

I thought it was a corpse.

I couldn't see anything else.

Extremely naturally—

Extremely commonly.

Extremely brazenly, melted among the scenery, not to talk like Konomi-san, but—if it was anyone else, they probably wouldn't notice that it was a human.

Rotting away—

Simply waiting to rot away until no end,
Just simply waiting,
A body.
That thing—was lying.
Facing upward.
Eyes open.
Standing watch.
Decaying.
Looking—at the sun up in the sky.
As if trying to crush its eyes.
Silently watching.
Silently decaying.
How long had it not slept for?
Under its eyes, deep black marks were engraved.
The clothes were in shambles too.
Barefoot.
Dirty all over.
No, not...dirty.
Filthy.
The most prominent aspect was its hair's color.
The orange color that was once beautiful and vivid—
Was now like rust.
Rust color.
The braids were so loosened,
They had lost their original form,
And were entangled with each other.
It was hollow.
Its existence itself was—faint.
"...Ma—"
I tried to call out—but hesitated.
A bad feeling—caught me first.
For instance—something like the feeling of witnessing

a slaughtered corpse, alike the feeling of witnessing a decapitated corpse—

A bad feeling.

A sickly feeling.

Space Creation—

Konomi-san only said that.

I see, indeed.

Even I—

If I could, I wouldn't stop here.

If it were someone else's business—

If I could just ignore it, I would have.

But—

No matter its appearance.

What was here—was my friend.

It involved me.

"Magokoro."

"..."

"Omokage—Magokoro."

"Aah—I was wondering who that was. So it's Ii-chan."

That voice sounded like someone who'd traveled for a week in a desert—however, Magokoro answered me with a seemingly conscious mind.

"Keh...Geragera...I knew Ii-chan would have been the one to call out to me...though I was in the midst of testing which would come first, between that and death."

"Hold on—I'll go buy water around here."

"It's fine...there's water here and there. Also, it looks like it'll rain tomorrow."

"..."

"I thought I might be able to die by starving, not eating or drinking, but I guess it won't be that simple. This body is...quite good at surviving."

"You... What are you doing...?"

"...If you want to talk, let's go somewhere else."

Magokoro—

I didn't know exactly which muscles she moved in what way, but still facing up, without changing her form much, she jumped up and straightened up.

In shambles—

Her appearance was in shambles—

But her physical abilities didn't seem to have diminished.

"Hey, aren't you nearly naked? Yeah just hold on, I'll buy you clothes—aah, no, the bathhouse before that...your hair too!"

I extended my hand—and touched Magokoro's hair.

And, that.

That felt like touching wires.

"—Wasn't it the feature you liked the most?"

"Ii-chan remembers every single thing from the past—so I'm bad with you," Magokoro said in a wrinkled voice. "It's fine, don't mind it. It's not like anyone's looking at me."

"...Looking."

I wasn't dull enough to not notice that she didn't mean it just because of the Space Creation she cast.

So—I didn't say anything more.

Magokoro,

"Gerageragera."

Producing a high-pitched laughter, she walked further in the Tenmangu, still barefoot. There, she arranged a bunch of stones where moss was sprouting in the form of a chair and sat on them. I thought you could easily slip on them, so I didn't sit next to her—

I firmly set my legs in front of Magokoro.

Crossed my arms.

And faced her.

"...I have a planet's worth of questions. But for starters, what's vague—what in the world were you doing?"

"A premature suicide."

Magokoro answered naturally.

"Even if I want to die, it's not like I'm living."

"You are living. In front of me."

"Geragera. Ii-chan is so front-facing."

Magokoro said.

"Did you know? Since way back—I always liked that part of Ii-chan."

"Now and before, I've always been back-facing. I'm only looking at the past. I can't see the future at all. If I could even have a glimpse of it—I wouldn't have let you end up in this state."

"Is that so? I quite like it myself. This state—well, in the end that's just—a shell."

"A shell?"

"Empty."

"...I see."

I untied my arms and shrugged.

"Everyone...is worried. What are you doing here?"

"...Everyone," Magokoro looked down and said. "How is everyone doing?"

"How, you say—"

So—you're concerned.

About the people from the apartment.

"—they were all temporarily sent to the hospital, but now everyone but Houko-chan got discharged. In Houko-chan's case, she just caught the flu in the hospital,

nothing to do with what you did."

"I see."

Strictly speaking, you could say Houko-chan was being restrained by Rabumi-san, but the serious mood would get ruined, so I held off.

I didn't call her a dakimakura by mistake.

"The apartment is now gone though—so everyone scattered to a friend's or family's house."

"I wonder—whether it won't go back to how it was before now."

Magokoro said in a weak tone, atypical of her.

"Because I—I broke it so it wouldn't go back."

"..."

"Even though they were like family. That apartment was—

"Even though they were like family."

I—agreed with Magokoro's words.

"...A home, huh."

"I don't have them—neither a home or a family. That's why—that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why that's why! That's why—I broke it, I think."

That's why.

She destroyed only the apartment.

This skilfully—this precisely.

Without leaving a shred, without leaving a trace.

Nowhere to be seen, in a single blow—

"...Your heart."

I said.

I had noticed—for some time. No, Konomi-san had already shown hints of that.

"Did you know a Thought Manipulation technique was casted on your heart?"

"Mm? Yeah."

Magokoro said, as if it didn't matter.

"I already removed that thing."

"Eh?"

"I said I removed it. It wasn't a big deal at all."

"You removed it...but how?"

"Aah, err you see..." Magokoro raised her face as if it was a hassle, and tapped her left chest with her fingers. "If my heart was being used like a pendulum for the technique, I just needed to perturb my heart's rhythm. It's just that simple."

"But the heart is an involuntary muscle, so you can't influence it with your own will, right? It shouldn't have been something you could remove by just hitting a sprint and getting your heartrate up."

"Ii-chan should understand it—the fundamental reason why I'm being called the Orange Seed. That's because I can precede any reason and rewrite myself—because I can control myself completely. The mechanism under the heart's movements is really simple, you know—it's essentially an electrical signal. The same as for the brain's mechanism. Fundamentally, the mechanism for any human living is all electric signals. A certain part of the heart reacts to the produced signal, a defined rhythm is only engraved by that. Even if you use grandiose words like involuntary to describe it, that mechanism is exceedingly simple."

"Hmm...I didn't know that. So?"

"So—look."

Magokoro pointed at my back.

At Kitano Tenmangu's parking lot.

In the past, that's where I was handed Mikoko-chan's vespa by Akiharu-kun.

Parking lot.

"**I gulped a battery from a car around there and electrocuted my heart.**"

"...Like a massage from an electrical shock?"

"Other than that, I could have stopped my heart... Well, there's lots of ways."

"Yeah..."

I see...

It was an incredibly brute force method—but certainly, it worked.

To stop a technique being constantly casted—that might have been the only way. I see, I was too caught up in my narrow view—no, however, only Magokoro would stay alive after something like that. No matter what, something so against common sense was outside of Jikoku-san's expectations.

"I see—that's why you chose Kitano Tenmangu. After all, this is where there are the most cars around here."

The tension coming from plugs wouldn't have been much for Magokoro. So she stayed at Tenmangu after that.

What a bother of a story.

"...Then you—your mind wasn't entirely dominated by the Thought Manipulation, right? If you truly rampaged...and were released, you shouldn't have been able to get that idea."

"Yup."

Magokoro nodded.

However—so, on the same day as when she destroyed the rundown apartment—probably around when I was

heading to the Saitou Clinic, she was already released from that Thought Manipulation? When I heard about the last *technique* from Rurero-san—she had already, on her own, independently—done something about it?

"The spell I casted on myself—wasn't so weak it'd be fully released by hypnosis of that level."

"..."

Kunagisa.

Kunagisa Tomo—The Blue Savant.

"Then—really, what are you doing in this place? Why won't you come back? Are you concerned because you hurt everyone? Then I won't tell you to not worry about it, but when I told them about you, everyone was worried."

"I don't deserve to cause you worries."

"Who needs anything to deserve worries?"

"You need qualifications for it. ...Ii-chan. Returning, but where? Where should I return? I have already destroyed the one place I could have returned to."

"I'm not talking about that—"

"**I'm the one talking about that**."

Magokoro said strongly.

Strongly enough to make me flinch.

"Hey, Ii-chan. Even if it was only half-assed—even if it wasn't complete, even if I removed it immediately, I—at that time, it's true that I was *released*."

"...Magokoro."

"Do you get it? The reason I did that—it wasn't Tokinomiya Jikoku or his hypnosis technique's fault. It's not because I was manipulated by him. That was what I wished for and did. I wished for and destroyed it—I wished for and hurt everyone."

"No, but—"

But.

But, that's—

"There's no 'buts', in this case. I know it—it's myself, so I know it. That wasn't my feelings being manipulated—I had always been oppressed.

"I couldn't forgive.

"That kind of...tranquil lifestyle with everyone."

"..."

Couldn't forgive.

Coming from Magokoro—

It was the first time I heard those words.

"I surely couldn't forgive that **this kind** of world existed—that, despite that only outrageous things continued to befall on me—I couldn't forgive that."

Forgiving.

And loving.

Magokoro—couldn't do it.

Even if...she seemed so happy.

Even if she got along well with everyone.

Deep in her heart.

The kind of life that up to then—she couldn't have brought to be even by error, the kind of world that was unrelated to her—she couldn't forgive its existence.

She couldn't forgive the existence of freedom.

And...

That's not something Tokinomiya Jikoku planted.

All of it was Magokoro's—will.

"I was shocked. To think I was yearning—wishing for such an action."

"..."

"To think my true thoughts were **like that**—I couldn't

believe it. I couldn't admit that there were such repulsive, filthy thoughts inside me."

"But—"

"I—I don't want to say it myself, but I have no other choice. I thought of myself as *a good person*. I thought I was virtuous. I thought—I had to be virtuous. Even then, those kinds of true thoughts—they were inside me. That denied everything. Even though I should have been virtuous."

"B-but!"

That's...wrong.

That's not something you should hate yourself for.

That's not something to blame yourself for that much.

Undefeated and unchallenged—therefore the Last.

But that didn't mean she was upright by any means. I didn't know how much the bunch at ER3's MS-2 understood that, but—her uniqueness wasn't any reason for Magokoro to be a saint.

That's a misunderstanding.

Saitou Takashi probably understood that.

Magokoro—was hurt.

Having led a life constantly being hurt, there's no way her body wouldn't be full of wounds.

If you're wounded, blood will come out,

If you're wounded, it'll hurt.

That's just natural.

So, Magokoro—

Was just bearing it.

But who knew that?

Being coerced to be virtuous.

The heart of the ones coerced to be clean and without fault.

I just had to remember—before each experiment frequently inserted among her daily life at the ER3—just how deeply distressed an expression she made.

How much she hated it.

What's unpleasant is unpleasant.

What's detestable is detestable.

What's scary is scary.

What's despicable is despicable.

But even then, Magokoro—

Didn't complain once.

She always tolerated it.

She always—forgave.

Therefore—undefeated and unchallenged.

For instance, someone like me, indifferent and insensitive—

Not something born from cowardice.

That's why I...

Doubled you with Kunagisa...

"Now...I can't face everyone. Even Hikari-san—I can't meet her ever again. Now, I can't go anywhere."

I can't go anywhere.

I can't go anywhere.

I can't go anywhere.

Magokoro mumbled to herself those words in repeat.

I didn't say anything.

I should have said something—in reality.

Saying that it wasn't true, that these kinds of emotions inside your heart weren't mistaken. That they were natural—that's why you're amazing for being able to restrain them. That it's something worthy of praise—I should have used every word possible and explained to her.

It should have been—simple,

It should have been easy.

How easy and simple it should have been-

To leave everything to hate—to leave everything to resentment, and directly face me or the fox-masked man. But even for doing something about her heart, that choice shouldn't have been easy for Magokoro.

Easy—and simple,

I'm sure it would have been comfortable.

To end the world—for this existence called the Last, to end the world.

But, she didn't do it.

How hard that must have been—

It would have been for the best if I explained that to her.

Really.

But...I couldn't.

Magokoro wasn't in such a shallow despair that she could be saved by that.

Jikoku-san's Thought Manipulation—

Was merely a trigger for Magokoro.

Was merely an opportunity.

"Hey, Ii-chan."

Magokoro said.

"Being alive...is boring."

"..."

"I don't—feel like I'm alive at all. Not just now, since way back—forever. Even if I want to die, I'm just living... Maybe I already died long ago. No—was I even alive from the start...? I have no memory—of being born."

Memories—of being born.

I don't have them either.

No one does.

But, even then—everyone is alive.

Living in this world.

"I don't feel alive at all...not just myself. It's the same for everyone. Everyone else—even Ii-chan, I don't know if you really exist in front of my eyes."

"..."

"I don't understand the world. Because I can't share it—with anyone."

Magokoro said.

"For example, those eyes—those orange pupils of mine. The light reflected in those eyes, my visible range is five to a dozen times larger than that of a normal person... To be honest, everything that can be called *light*, most things...even radio waves, I can see them. Only when I want to though."

"That's—the first I've heard of it."

"I thought you might get creeped out if I told you. Not just light too, sound, smell, taste... Everything I feel is on a different scale. That's why—the world I'm seeing is totally different from everyone else's."

The cook from the Wet Crow's Feather Island—

Concerning *taste* and *smell*, she had quite keen senses, but—even then, I'm sure she only had a fraction of Magokoro's ability.

Then.

Next to Magokoro—

What had I really seen until now?

"Please go home, Ii-chan."

After a long silence—

Magokoro casted down her eyes, probably closed them,

and said so without looking at me.

"Because I noticed my true thoughts—I can't be at Ii-chan's side now. Ii-chan understands that too, right?"

"..."

"I...despise Ii-chan."

"Magokoro..."

"That fox jerk too—the ER3 too, Kokoromi-sensei too—everyone, I despise them. I hate the entire world."

I heard that voice—inside her heart.

Magokoro added.

I hate it, I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.

"It was like a scream—like an angry voice. I heard my own screams. If I were to carry that disgusting self—and still try to be nearby Ii-chan. With another trigger—

"I might end up killing Ii-chan."

"Killing—me."

"Even though I love Ii-chan. Even though I should have loved this world."

"..."

I wonder—the fox-masked man.

How much of this did he understand?

Did he predict that things would end up like this? Is that why he did nothing in these last ten days—and didn't make Magokoro *end the world?*

That was quite an emotional decision.

A forceful way of thinking.

But—

Even if she told me to go home.

I couldn't—do that.

"Then, you—what are you going to do afterwards?"

"Nothing. I'm not alive, so I can't die. Well, I'll pass

time sluggishly...I might meet Ii-chan if I stayed in Kyoto, so I guess I should move somewhere else...well, not like I care."

A premature—suicide.

Was that what she meant?

The meaning of casting chains upon herself wasn't an attempt to live, but simply something that the ones unable to choose death, inevitably, without fail, must choose—

Was it something that sad?

Kunagisa—

Should have done that, waiting for someone.

Yearning for me—she chained herself.

She put a lock on her heart.

"Hey—Magokoro."

"Um?"

"I did tell you about my friend—about Kunagisa Tomo, didn't I?"

"Yeah... You did. When was it again?"

"We broke up."

I said.

"It's not like we were a couple or something, and thinking about it now, we didn't understand each other enough to be described as 'on good terms'—although we were beside each other, we didn't get close. We both—somewhere in our heart, rejected the other. In my case, overtly—in Kunagisa's, she rejected me by accepting me. By affirming me—in the end, she denied me. Even though we trusted and believed in each other—it's like it was mismatched and swaying and zigzagged."

"..."

"Although we had good compatibility—I liked her, and

she liked me too. But you see, we surely messed up our meeting—six years ago, when I first met Kunagisa at that sanbox—ever since the first meeting, Kunagisa and I pushed the wrong buttons."

After that—for six years.

We always continued like that.

Averting our eyes from the important things.

Melting in each other... Colluding with each other.

At times running away.

At times hugging.

At times breaking.

At times fixing.

But—

"But, we were never able—to confront each other."

"...Ii-chan, what are you trying to say?"

"We should have fought—I should have said what I wanted. The good parts, and the bad parts, the pleasant parts and the unpleasant parts, I should have clearly said them. Same for Kunagisa. She shouldn't have forgiven my everything—instead, she should have confronted me and gotten angry. Saying things like 'You useless dumbass,' and cursing at me as much as she wanted. But because we pressed the wrong buttons when we met—"

Now—

We had no other choice but to part.

We had no other choice but to bereave.

"Saying your true thoughts of when you were released definitely isn't wrong—though, of course, doing it like this time is out of the question. Also, for you, able to completely control yourself, overlapping restraint with restraint, that became your natural self. Even if that required chains on your mind, even if that required you to

fool yourself, I'm sure that was your ideal self—if you want to live, not alone but with everyone else, that won't do it. You have come into contact with people and throw away your mask."

Though I'm not one to talk.

Though it's not something I should say.

But, even if that's a sin or a taboo.

I must say it—for Magokoro's sake.

"You are too far ahead to be able to live with anyone else. As you said, no one has eyes as good as you do—so they need to get closer."

"If I get closer—everyone will get injured."

Maybe even worse.

Magokoro said powerlessly.

"There will be collateral damage...I'm envious of Ii-chan. No matter what you do, in the end everyone likes you."

"That's not—really true."

Kazuhito-san's words still stabbed at my chest.

However, that too, I understood it wasn't something he said because he wanted to. I'm sure that was—speaking on behalf of others, I get that. Someone had to say what a normal, common person contributing to society—thought of someone like me, I get that. Kazuhito-san, who had a strong sense of responsibility had to say it, I get that.

But that made it pierce me even more.

"Everyone is in love with Ii-chan."

"..."

"I'm sure—that's because everyone understands that Ii-chan is a good guy. Yeah. At least, that was the case for me. Although you were mean, had a bad personality, and it

was unclear what you thought of—even then, Ii-chan was the only one to praise me."

He was kind—

A really good guy.

"...That...might be true."

"On the other side—no one likes me. Everyone—just tries to use me. They treat me like a tool. I'm sure that's because they know—just how much of a despicable person I truly am. How much, in the bottom of my heart—I'm suppressing hatred. I liked everyone at the apartment, but somewhere in my heart, I hated them. They seemed happy, that pissed me off."

"—I see."

"People who are happy—"

Magokoro said.

With a voice filled with all the hatred she had.

"People who are happy, all of them should just die."

However, that was...

Such a tiny hatred.

And that—

Sounded like a scream to my ears.

"Then—you're fine with it, right?"

"...With what?"

"Me going home, never meeting again, and you living alone forever—no, you alone, by yourself, continuing to exist—you can bear it, right?"

I said, to strongly urge her.

I said, to incessantly attack Magokoro.

"You probably have a few to a few dozen times the life expectancy and vitality of a normal person. Not to take Rurero-san's words, but you wouldn't even drown by

drinking mud lying around. You can suffer and suffer and suffer to no end, but you will surely be able to bear it. Your endurance is too great to die with a premature suicide. You will only suffer. Continue to suffer. And—when you'll be suffering, I won't be at your side. Are you okay with that?"

"..."

"If you are, I'll just go. After all, no matter what happens, I was for sure the one who opened your lock, the one who broke our promise, the one who couldn't save you, and the one who killed you once. You have a right to hate me. If you want to reject me I can't even extend my arms to you."

Therefore.

Therefore, I.

"Therefore, I—no matter how much I wish to save you—no matter how painful parting with you is, no matter how much I hate it—I will bear it. I will shut up and see you die."

"..."

"I cannot—save you."

I said—

And took one step away from Magokoro.

With just that, I came to see Magokoro as cruelly small.

Small—and far away.

"What about it? Will you be fine alone?"

"Of course I won't!"

Magokoro suddenly raised her face—

And screamed with tears on her face.

"Don't you get—I've always been telling you to save me, useless?!"

"...I get it."

I undid the step I took—closed in one more step, and

firmly aligned my gaze with Magokoro's—I ran my finger through her orange hair, and hugged her small head against my shoulder.

"I've always—heard your cry for help."

And I said.

"That's why I'm going to save you."

"...But what should I do?"

Magokoro asked me while crying.

"What exactly should I do...I don't understand what living is...even now, I don't know if Ii-chan is there. For me this world's existence—is too uncertain. I don't know if I'm dead or alive. I don't know if there truly is a world. It's as if—everything has ended."

The end.

The end of the world.

The end of the Story.

It was—inevitable.

The existence of Humanity's Last.

In the first place, from the start, Magokoro—she was created and manufactured—was distributed **as an existence that had ended**, as an existence that couldn't progress any further.

Because she had ended—

She couldn't obtain anything.

Everything she looked at was something she knew.

Everything she touched was something she knew.

Seeing Magokoro experiencing the unknown at the apartment, constantly saying "Amazing"—was for me, very sad.

The world had no resistance.

The world had no firmness.

I'm sure that for Magokoro, living was simple.

Too simple.

She forgot—how to walk.

No one could teach her that.

Someone who didn't possess a hundred legs couldn't understand.

The way Magokoro walked.

Only Magokoro could understand.

Even then—she lost it.

Just by looking a little at her own true thoughts.

I'm sure what she learned then wasn't just her ugly thoughts—but also how complete the existence of the Orange Seed is—all of it.

That she had nothing behind her.

That she had nothing in front of her.

That she had nothing.

"...Just one person."

I—said.

That was something I had thought of beforehand.

What I had—decided.

"There's—just one person. That's still not over for you...**someone you haven't finished**, just one person in this world. It's still not enough to call you the Last. There is just—one incomplete spot. Just one shortcoming."

"...?"

Magokoro—

Raised her face from my shoulder.

"Who...is it? Is it Ii-chan?"

"You already finished me at the ER3—the one thing you haven't done yet is settling things with **your predecessor**."

I said.

Magokoro's orange color—
I was looking at a different world,
I looked straight into her eyes.
"You still haven't settled things—with Aikawa Jun."
"..."
"You have to settle things."

3

Since I didn't want Konomi-san to hear me—since I couldn't let her hear me, I sneakily got out of Kitano Tenmangu from the back, found a convenient spot, and there, with my phone, made a call to the Saitou Clinic.

Emoto-san answered.

"Ah...Ikkun."

"Hello."

"What happened? You didn't quite come back from your errands... So everyone's worried. Misora-chan and Takami-chan went to search for you. You haven't seen them?"

"No... Sorry, I caused you trouble. Thinking about it, I also borrowed Emoto-san's Benz. Sorry, I will come back shortly."

"It's fine...as long as you're okay. I thought you might have had a plan."

"Err—Emoto-san. Sorry, but could you give the phone to Mr. Fox?"

"Eh...? Ah, yes. Hold on. It looks like he's talking with Rurero-san on the second floor, so it might take some time."

"Yes. I'll wait, no matter how long."

A waiting melody rang.

Gymnopédies.

I was made to wait a few minutes, then the fox-masked man answered "What. Did you get lost on your way, my enemy?" in an exceedingly bored tone.

Without any greeting or preambule—

I cut to the chase, straight to the point.

"If Aikawa-san and Magokoro—fought again, who do you think would win?"

"Magokoro. It's obvious."

"Then, Mr. Fox."

I said.

"If Magokoro wins, I'll die—so if Aikawa-san wins, please die."

"..."

"I will kill you."

The fox-masked man—

After leaving a small pause,

"Kukukuh."

Laughed.

"If Magokoro wins—at that time, I just need to kill you, right?"

"Yes, exactly."

"**Saitou Takashi**."

Then.

For the first time—he named himself to me.

"It's my name—engrave it into your brain and remember it."

"...**XXXXX**."

Then—

I answered without a moment's delay.

"That's my name—There's no need to remember it. After all, it's a name you soon won't be able to forget.

ACT 22 - SCATTERING LACERATION

AIKAWA JUN
RED

0

In the end, I wonder who the bad guy was?

1

Everything started to end.

At once.

Suddenly.

As if flowing.

As if converging—it started to end.

At first—it was the Demonic Killer.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

"Then, I'll go now."

With his baggage neatly gathered over his shoulders—actually, in the first place, Zerozaki didn't have enough baggage to need to gather it—early in the morning, at an hour when everyone had yet to awaken, he sneakily appeared beside my bed and told me.

"...Is that so."

"What? Aren't you gonna stop me?"

"I'm sleepy."

"Wake up!"

"Why are you mad... Anyway, you say you want to go, but do you have a place in mind? Your clan has been annihilated, so you don't have anyone to rely on, do you?"

"Not necessarily."

Crouching to align his sight with mine, who had raised my upper half, Zerozaki laughed.

"If it's just for a short while, I have an old

acquaintance I can go to. Also—well, Aniki asked me to do something. About my little sister. I thought she was a pain, so I dropped her off somewhere, but I guess I have to look after her."

"...What is that girl doing now?"

"I'm going to start searching from now on. Let me see, maybe I should rely on those *Team* guys...either way, I'll find her immediately. I told you I'm good at gathering information, didn't I?"

"I see."

"It was short-lived, but I felt some nostalgia for the first time in a while—about this kind of cohabitation. Kahahah. Although it was just temporary. Well, if this went on any longer, that pervert woman would drive me crazy, so—"

"You're really bad with Emoto-san, huh."

"I'm bad with her kind—though I don't really get why. It's instinctual. I wonder if I had some trauma in my youth?"

"Isn't that most likely because your parents had that kind of personality as well?"

"Then how would you explain my personality? If my parents were like that, I'd commit suicide. I swear—anyhow, the more I look at that woman, the more I feel like wearing a white blouse and swimsuit myself. How scary."

"That's seriously scary, yeah..."

I ended up imagining it.

Uwaaa...

Kahahah, Zerozaki laughed,

"Also."

He said.

"It seems—my role is already over."

'It's over'—

Zerozaki said.

"So, what are you gonna do now?"

"Nothing, really—I don't really have anything to do except ending the Zerozaki. The only thing I can say with certainty is that we'll never meet again."

"I bet. I can also affirm that."

Mm? Zerozaki tilted his head.

"Setting the role thing apart, ultimately, what did I come to do **in a place like this**?"

"Isn't that obvious? You came to see me."

"No matter how free I am, I wouldn't do that."

Let me see—Zerozaki said.

"Let's just say I came to give back something from May I had forgotten. Also, on the side, getting back something I forgot—about that much. That would be the coolest."

"What is it? Is the thing you forgot your signature phrase?"

"What a nonsense."

"It's masterpiece."

"Was it masterpiece?"

"I'm not sure about nonsense."

Zerozaki simply laughed—

And I simply...did not laugh.

"Hey Zerozaki."

"What?"

"For you—"

I asked, facing Zerozaki's chest.

"—is living boring?"

"..."

Zerozaki went silent for a bit, then said,

"Nah, not really."

I nodded to that answer.

"Then, take care. Human Failure."

“Yeah. Do your best, Defective Product."

"Bye bye, Selinuntius."

"Run, Melos."

Clap clap clap.

Hitting the back of our hands with each other three times,

In the dimness, the Demonic Killer left.

In the end—speaking of the end, in the end, between Zerozaki and the fox-masked man—Saitou Takashi—what was their connection? Was there even one in the first place? It's unclear. From his half-death experience Zerozaki told me about, the fox-masked man might have had some influence on it—and he might have not. Then I'm sure that—it must have been so long ago that, whether it happened or not, it was the same.

But that's another story.

Then—

Following, the *Thirteen Stairs*.

The *Thirteen Stairs* were also meeting their end.

Readily.

With one sentence from the fox-masked man.

"I'm disbanding the *Thirteen Stairs*."

The fox-masked man said.

"Yesterday—inside me, Akira died."

The Thirteen Stairs' first step—Kajou Akira.

"Therefore—the *Thirteen Stairs* is over. I no longer

need thirteen *limbs*. Just this head is enough."

Those words sounded cruel even to Emoto-san, who had essentially already quit the *Thirteen Stairs*.

Furthermore—

Ichirizuka Konomi.

Migishita Rurero.

Miotsukushi Misora.

Miotsukushi Takami.

The shock those girls—whose loyalty, fanaticism, fondness, and devotion on the level of self-sacrifice didn't falter against the fox-masked man, Humanity's Worst, felt—must have exceeded their imagination.

More than a disbanding, this was a dismemberment.

However, naturally, the fox-masked man didn't care—even then, due to his excessive frankness, even I was embarrassed and was about to say something, but as if stopping me,

"If Magokoro isn't aiming for me, there's no need to stay clumped with everyone."

And.

He quickly—

Left—the Saitou Clinic.

"Don't fret—I won't flee or hide. I have my own preparations to do."

Apparently.

After that, each member of the *Thirteen Stairs* took various actions—but ultimately, everyone left Saitou Clinic by the end of the day.

In that way—it ended.

It was over.

"I didn't expect to get free time like that—but there's no helping it. In this kind of case, the end is essential."

As expected, Konomi-san was strong.

Even if the result was disbandment, as the oldest member of the *Thirteen Stairs*, she couldn't continue to act pathetically in this situation. It was like that.

"Depending on how you think—for Mr. Fox, Kajou-san's death was a good thing."

"What?"

"Because in its own way, that was a spell—and a wraith."

Then, Konomi-san said.

"Well then—it might be unreasonable to say this from my position, but I'm entrusting the future to you, Nonsense User-san."

"Yeah."

The future.

Hearing that—my heart hurt a little.

My heart hurt a lot.

But—

Nothing could be done about that anymore.

After Konomi-san, next was Rurero-san.

"Don't say anything to the Doctor. She'd just end up whining."

"But—shouldn't you go back to recovering?"

"It's fine—Aah, it's not like I gave up or anything. I'm saying I'm okay now."

"...Are you going to chase after him?"

"I won't—despite how it looks, I know when to quit. The skill of being able to handle rejection is a characteristic of a good woman."

"Then why—"

"I want to be alone."

Rurero-san said in a refreshing tone.

"When I'm here, I feel fun in a weird way—it's a bit tough in sad times. ...Though I think that's mostly your fault, *Ii-chan*."

"...Rurero-san."

I—previously, said something of the sort to Rurero-san.

And decided to put my resolve into words.

"I—decided to save the world."

"..."

"I decided to fight for the world."

"...I see."

In response to my words Rurero-san made a puzzled face for a while—but ultimately gave out a light smile.

"Then, well, if we both live, we'll meet again—we might be enemies again at that time, but if I had to say, I'd be grateful if we could be allies."

Then—

Rurero-san jumped down from the second floor window.

She should still have had a leg in a plaster, but she somehow managed to land and left my field of vision by running.

So...

Well, as I had expected, the most difficult ones, the Miotsukushi Sisters, Misora-chan and Takami-chan—each sat symmetrically in a corner of the waiting room, clasping their arms around their knees.

"...You're depressing, so I'm gonna chase you out."

Emoto-san casually said something horrible.

This person, I swear.

Who knows if they heard that, but by the end of the day, these two, Misora-chan and Takami-chan stood up.

Then approached me, still symmetrically.

Are they going to try to kill me again? This is bad. Why did Zerozaki leave? I thought that for an instant, but—

"We were in your care."

"We were in your care."

Misora-chan and Takami-chan both bowed and lowered their heads in a frighteningly cute way.

"Sorry for only causing trouble."

"Sorry for only causing trouble."

"No...It's fine."

"Please forgive us for nearly killing you."

"Please forgive us for nearly killing you."

"..."

It wasn't something easy to apologize for, but...

It's not something you could apologize for that simply either.

"I...we will temporarily go back to our birthplace."

"I...we will temporarily go back to our birthplace."

"Birthplace?"

Aah, I see.

The Niounomiya and their branches functioned as families, so they should have had relatives. It was hard to think Misora-chan and Takami-chan were of adult age... Umm, well, if they were *professional killers*, for those relatives, it's like these twins had been taken along by Humanity's Worst, like they were under a bad influence, so they must've been worried...

"Why not? Take the time to relax there. Well, Mr. Fox too, you see, although he said that, I'm sure he thought of you and—"

When I was in the middle of saying some kind words I didn't mean, as if to stop me, Misora-chan and Takami-

chan swayed their heads frenetically.

"We don't care about Mr. Fox now."

"We don't care about Mr. Fox now."

"Eh?"

"Well then, please comfort a marvelous forthcomingness."

"Well then, please comfort a marvelous forthcomingness."

Farewell.

The two said, with their trademark simultaneity at the end, then quickly changed into their priest robes and, unlike Rurero-san, went out properly from the front gate. Politely greeting me, who was left behind, they left.

...What?

So they could do greetings and the like if they felt like it.

When I was thinking that,

"Ikkun, it's bad."

Emoto-san said.

With a light smile on her face.

"...What?"

"If you let me speak from a mental health standpoint, when people have their faith broken, their instinct is to, instead of throwing away faith, search for something else to believe in."

"In other words?"

"They fell for you!"

"Don't joke with me!"

That hypothesis made my skin shiver.

Actually, it was unclear why Emoto-san was in such high spirits. She made me think of Rizumu-chan for a moment.

"So-sorry... I-I got carried away... Wh-when I become close to someone, I-I end up talking too much... So-sorry, Ikkun, ah, of-of course now you hate someone filthy like me..."

"..."

It's a hassle when she gets hurt by my retorts...

I think it was because of the circumstances, but the closer I get to Emoto-san, the harder it becomes to handle her.

"So."

I said, still facing the front door.

"What are you going to do now—Emoto-san?"

"Eh?"

"No, for Emoto-san—whether the *Thirteen Stairs* get disbanded or not, it might be the same now—but now that Rurero-san isn't there, you no longer have a reason to stay here, do you?"

"Umm...that's... Well, really?" Emoto-san said. "...Are you telling me to get out? A-are you telling me I'm a nuisance so I should get out? C-cruel... Are you still a human? H-how, how can you say such cruel things?"

"...No, I didn't. Also you said those cruel things to Misora-chan and Takami-chan earlier..."

Keeping my speech vague to dodge the duty of retorting.

It was a new technique.

"You're not Misora-chan or Takami-chan, but...Emoto-san, do you normally have a house or something? Like how Izumu-kun had a residence to hide in."

"Mm...well, somewhat."

"Somewhat?"

"Somewhat, a mansion...or something along those lines..."

"..."

It's been a long time since I heard the word mansion.

A backdoor doctor...it's not like a bourgeois or a celebrity...

"But...I haven't been there in a while...I wonder what's up with the rights...? I just left everything up to the caretaker..."

"No, please stop...I don't want to hear about it."

"Umm...but let me see."

Emoto-san held my hands with hers.

She scrutinized it for a while.

"...Your wound has properly healed. Looks like no bacteria got in."

"Aah—from the apartment."

Emoto-san had healed my hand from when it got stabbed by shards of wood and glass. It wasn't very deep so there was no need to bandage it, but Emoto-san always paid attention to it.

"...Ikkun, you're hiding something, right?"

"Eh?"

"For Mr. Fox to say something like that so suddenly, it's strange. Akira-san was someone very important for Mr. Fox...so he shouldn't die that easily."

"Are you saying he died because of me? Because—I said something?"

"I was the one to pass the phone to Mr. Fox..."

Aah.

Right.

"Yes, then that might be right. But—Emoto-san. Of course, since you took great care of me and I caused you

much trouble, if you really want to know, I will tell you but..."

"Umm..."

Emoto-san crossed her arms and closed her eyes.

It seemed she was seriously thinking.

"...Hmm. Nah...no need to."

"Are you fine with that?"

"I'm...not, but you don't need to tell me."

Emoto-san said.

"But please tell me one thing. Do you need a doctor?"

"...No."

I said.

"In the Story from now on—the role of a healer is no longer needed."

"...Ugh."

"Please don't cry..."

Like that—

Emoto-san left too.

Leaving the Benz behind, she left by foot.

You can use the car anytime you want and leave it anywhere, she said.

It's fine.

That was the cheapest one.

...

Well, I just thanked her honestly.

The *Thirteen Stairs*, the organization created so that the one who'd once had his karma severed from the world and the Story, Humanity's Worst, Saitou Takashi, could influence the world and the Story, could end the world and the Story.

Though its usefulness was pretty unclear—

Now, everything was over.

Somehow—

Of course, in most cases, the *Thirteen Stairs* were my enemies, however—even then, what was it, this feeling similar to loneliness.

It felt like looking at a movie's credits.

Rather than disappointing—it felt short.

It was painful—I couldn't feel like leaving my seat.

So...

Now that all was over.

Inside the building, only Aikawa Jun and I were left.

"Waaaai! I'm alone with Ikkun! So happy! Like 'Both hot and cold disappear when you reach the other shore, except it's Sanzu River'!"

"...Aah, that reminds me, you had that gag...though I almost forgot."

Rather, those words made it seem like she didn't like being alone with me.

Aikawa-san—

Was wearing low-rise jeans, a short, strong tank top and a bandana around her head. It was casual fashion. Up until today, she was always in her usual Contractor suit, but now that the fox-masked man and everyone from the *Thirteen Stairs* left, maybe she could relax a little.

"Hah—everyone left."

"Yes."

"Good grief—really, you've gone soft at the end. You, and that shitty dad. Why are more and more people leaving when the climax is now, when the festival is only starting? Normally you do that, you know, like in the last chapter of a battle manga. The allies that fought alongside you gather and the enemies you've stood against rush in.

You have to do that, okay?"

Everyone from the apartment—

And Hikari-san, Kouta-san—

And Zeroraki—

The *Thirteen Stairs*—

"Because it's the closure, after all. We already did that in the party in September. Though, of course, it was lacking in excitement—well, thinking about this as after the festival, it can't be helped, right?"

"After the festival? Well, it doesn't really feel like it. It doesn't feel lonely, but at least it's refreshing and easy to understand. Hahah—anyhow, now we can finally talk leisurely, Ii-tan."

"Were you waiting for this to happen?"

"No, not really—I wasn't. This situation only came about thanks to your efforts."

"Though it might not be effort, but negligence."

"Heh. Well, regardless, Ii-tan has something, right? Something to tell me."

"Yes—well. But how did you know?"

"Did you also nearly forget that? Even mind reading is easy peasy, for Aikawa Jun-onee-sama."

"After all, Jun-san hasn't been achieving a lot recently—you can blame my bad memory for forgetting a few things."

"You're telling me."

Then we—moved somewhere else.

First "Let's do the naked apron play. The one who loses at rock-paper-scissors has to wear the naked apron and make dinner. " I naturally rejected that sublime proposition from Aikawa-san. We cooked dinner normally, brought it to the waiting room, and faced each

other at the table.

While eating—

I told her everything up to now, except for a single point. Naturally, there must have been a lot of parts overlapping with what Aikawa-san already knew—but anyway, I told her about everything from the last few months, the last six years, and the last nineteen years.

The only point I excluded was, of course—

The personal promise with the fox-masked man.

I still hadn't told that to anyone—and didn't intend to. The fox-masked man didn't really need to stay quiet, but I didn't want Aikawa-san or Magokoro—to feel responsible.

For the fox-masked man's death.

And of course, for my death.

Aikawa-san listened to me in silence, and only when she understood I was finished,

"Hmm."

She replied with a dull answer.

"Well, it's not like I don't understand... However, that reminds me. This morning, just after my shitty dad left, you called Kouta, right? What was that?"

"Eh? Aah..."

How keen, as usual.

No blind spots or carelessness.

"That was simply a report of affairs. I was in her care for various things in this case. After all, the one who found Jun-san and Zerozaki was Kouta-san."

"Hmm... Well, it's fine."

Although Aikawa-san said that, she seemed to be slightly bothered by it, after looking at me for a moment, she eventually said "But, you know," in a voice that

screamed she felt like it was a hassle, as if talking to herself.

"A rematch with Magokoro—huh."

"Aren't you feeling it?"

"No—I'm simply grateful for you creating the occasion for a revenge match. However—what does it mean?"

"..."

"I thought that this Magokoro girl had no reason to accept such a battle. To her, she already beat me with ease last month."

"Concerning that, she doesn't seem to remember."

"Is that so. She doesn't remember, huh—how much can those words be trusted, I wonder."

"Magokoro, you see—Jun-san. **She isn't living in this world**."

I said.

Aah, I screwed up—

I remembered Kunagisa's words.

"The world is, at least up to now, built in a longitudinal way, right? But she can only move sideways—because she has nothing like a parent. I think that's the decisive difference between Jun-san and Magokoro."

"..."

"What bothered me was how Mr. Fox called Magokoro *his granddaughter*—thinking about it normally, in this case, making Jun-san and Magokoro sisters like Doraemon and Doramy would have been the most appropriate. Thinking normally."

"No no, that's thinking too far, Ii-tan. We might be fundamentally the same thing, but I'm different from Magokoro at the roots."

"Even then—it doesn't change that for Magokoro, you

were not a *sister* but a *parent*."

"Oi oi—a mom, at this age? Please spare me—that said, thinking about that shitty dad's age, it's not too weird. I see... Not *siblings*, but *children*."

"So in short—Jun-san. For Magokoro, you are her only link to the longitunality of this world. Therefore, the only one able to tell her 'You are alive' is you, Jun-san."

A *parent teaching* their *child* about *life*.

That meaning was plain and clear.

But Magokoro wasn't provided with that simplicity.

Because she was excellent.

Because she was docile.

Everyone thought—

She already knew that.

Even I...I thought that at first,

Even when I understood I was wrong—I didn't do anything.

I couldn't do anything.

"Living, huh..."

Aikawa-san said.

"Aah...for instance, the Zerozaki Clan."

"Eh?"

"The Zerozaki Clan. Number three of the *Killing Names*. The guy who went out during the night. Well, he might have been an extreme example... But, generally speaking, what do you think is the part that makes them different from normal murderers?"

"...Is it that strangers hang out like a family?"

"Well, right. That's it. However, that’s more of a result and not a reason—the reason I don't want to get involved with them, the reason I find them dangerous, is because they have no reason to murder."

"Reason—"

If I remember correctly, I heard about that.

I heard from Moeta-kun.

"Even then, there's a trigger—something like a trigger that leads to murder. But, however, in the end, a trigger is but a trigger—there's nothing other than bloodlust. For the most part—no matter what happens, they won't feel anything?"

"They won't feel—anything."

"For those guys to form a family—it's in order to realize they are living beings. Conversely—if they don't do that, they won't be able to feel like they're alive."

"They won't—feel."

"Ii-tan. What do you think living is?" Aikaw-san said. "You see—I think that living is *thinking you are living*."

That was—

The same as what Zerozaki said.

Precisely as Zerozaki Hitoshiki from the Zerozaki Clan said.

"I think that the recognition of your living state is the meaning of life. Isn't that why roller coasters feel good?"

Well, though I've never ridden one, Aikawa-san laughed.

"I've had experiences of being thrown into the air from an aircraft, so it's kinda the same."

"If you say it's the same, aircrafts are going to cry... Thinking that you are living, is it? Recently—that's a feeling that I've felt a lot—though long ago it was something I didn't feel at all."

Rather—

I felt like I was dead.

The same as—the current Magokoro.

It was as if I was facing myself—

Me, who never faced anything.

"Sooner or later."

Aikawa-san said.

"That's the case for everyone living on this side—it's full of guys not fully living. There's a ton of guys not living at all. That was the case for Ichihime too...for Kouta too. Everyone, they're lacking somewhere. But—there aren't many guys as lacking as you. At least until recently—I thought that."

That was—something she had already told me.

Just after the events at Sumiyuri Academy.

That I was lacking various things-

Therefore, everyone went crazy after looking at me.

Like they were looking at their own defects.

"...And now?"

"Haahn?"

"Now—what do you think? About me."

"Now and before and in the future, I think you're a wonderful guy. Heeh—aren't you the one who knows it the most? You—you, how do you think of your current, changed self?"

Having more things to protect.

Having more things I don't want to lose.

Having made a lot of things,

That I wanted,

That I liked.

I ended up realizing.

I ended up admitting.

Now I—

Even if you tore my mouth, I couldn't say that everything was the same.

Things like 'living has no meaning', or 'I'm fine with dying, or 'it doesn't involve me, or 'I'm not interested', now—

I couldn't say them.

"...To be honest, it's a pain."

"Heeh."

"But—if I had to answer, it would be 'Not much'. Not much. It's pretty unexpected, but I like it. This self isn't...bad."

With this self—

I could feel like I'm alive.

I could think that way.

"I—think I'm alive."

"Good for you, isn't it?"

"Yes," I nodded. "I think most of it was thanks to Jun-san."

"Not really...so? Now, you want me to teach that feeling to Magokoro? Want me to teach her what it means to be alive? I'm not God, you know."

"Aren't you confident?"

"What?"

"Aren't you confident you could change Magokoro's mind, Jun-san—the mind of an impertinent brat spouting narcissist, adolescent, childish thoughts?"

"...What a cheap provocation."

Aikawa-san—smiled cynically.

It felt like I hadn't seen that smile in a long time.

"And I always take on those cheap provocations."

"...Thank you very much."

"But let me hear one thing—you...you—couldn't you have persuaded Magokoro then?"

Precisely like a God, Aikawa-san asked.

"With your nonsense, couldn't you have made Magokoro *think she was living*? For you—that shouldn't have been that hard, right? Of course, that wouldn't have led her on the longitudinal plan—but couldn't you have become Magokoro's *big brother*?"

"Who knows... It's a past that didn't happen, so talking in hypotheticals is pointless... But to be honest, I won't say I could have—but I don't think that was unreasonable enough to call it impossible."

"What? So you really wanted to present me with the opportunity of a revenge match?"

"I can't say that's not the case—to be frank, I don't ever want to hear that kind of excuse from Jun-san again..."

"That was a joke. Don't take it seriously."

"I get that though."

"So, what are your true thoughts?"

"That'll probably—be the end."

I answered Aikawa-san's inquiry.

Because—it's the end.

Because everything will get cleared up with that.

These—last few months.

These last six years.

And—these last nineteen years.

Because everything—will end.

"Jun-san needs to be the one to end it—or it won't be quite right. The last of the last needs to be closed off coolly or it'll be boring. It wouldn't work with me. It won't work if it's not Jun-san."

"Han. Well said."

Aikawa-san wore a bitter smile—

Then, closed her eyes and nodded.

"Got it—though it'll come with conditions, I'll accept the request from the Nonsense User. This Aikawa Jun will contract that job."

"I'm relying on you."

"It's not a big deal. It'll be a light sweeping win."

With this—

The stage was completely set.

Now there was really only the end left.

That was what I thought.

"But—Jun-san. You talked about conditions—"

"Before that, tell me one thing," Aikawa-san said as if stopping me. "**On which side—are you betting**?"

"...Eh?"

"Don't play dumb—you're betting on who'll win between me and Magokoro with my shitty dad, aren't you? If not, there's no way Kajou Akira would die inside him."

She saw through it—huh.

Setting aside the goal of that bet, she at least saw through the contents... If possible, I wanted to keep it all a secret, but now it couldn't be helped.

I said.

"I'm betting on Aikawa Jun."

"Heeh."

"Anyone but Jun-san would be inconceivable."

"You're giving me quite the high praise—however, even then, what a reckless bastard you are. You saw me getting one hit KOed by Magokoro—right?"

"My trust for you won't be shaken with just that—it could also have been a lucky punch. Just, if..." Though with hesitation—now that I'd come this far, I thought I should express the only worry I'd been carrying... No, concern. "If Jun-san—**isn't fine with Mr. Fox losing to**

me—that's a different story."

"How foolish."

Aikawa-san said, as if it was truly stupid.

In a fed up, ridiculing tone.

"That's not an object of concern... Rather, it gives me more motivation."

"But—"

I—thought it was a fair worry.

Because—

Saitou Takashi was still... Alive.

He hadn't been—killed by Aikawa-san.

"That's not it."

Aikawa-san said.

"It's fine—then, let me see. Everyone's left—so I'll tell you. What I was up to last month."

"..."

Right... That was it.

What Aikawa-san and the fox-masked man did—

During this October.

My concern could't disappear without finding that out.

"Err, the place was...the place was...the place doesn't matter. Well, it was here and there. Here and there, all over the place. The damage done by Magokoro was big, so most of the time was spent recovering. And, the rest—I was accompanying my shitty dad."

"Accompanying?"

"Here and there, he told me to come...so I followed him. I was wondering why he was acting so sneakily, but I finally understood after hearing your story now. It's not like I couldn't get it from hearing just parts of it but—that shitty dad was running away from you."

"Well, that's certainly possible. But—Jun-san, why did

you follow Mr. Fox? If it was Jun-san—though you're not Magokoro, you could have escaped any time, right? And at that time, there was nearly nobody from the *Thirteen Stairs* near Mr. Fox—"

He had already—

Mr. Fox had already told the members of the then existing *Thirteen Stairs* that *they could betray him*, so its activities were temporarily put on hold. Even Konomi-san, I doubt she was at his side for a long period.

You're wrong, Aikawa-san said.

"I had no reason to run away—in the first place, I headed towards Sumiyuri Academy in order to kill him."

"Yeah, of course, but—"

"I was hindered by Magokoro, and, how should I put it, that threw off my timing. Although it was for his own sake, that shitty dad looked after me when I was injured—it wasn't the mood to start a fight, but I couldn't let the person I'd always been chasing flee either—so I followed him."

"I see. And so that was just a family meeting?"

Not an idyllic atmosphere.

Rather, a bloodthirsty one.

That said—that probably went along with what the fox-masked man had planned. To make Aikawa-san move, generally it was better to pull than to push.

Outdated.

He said he would use the outdated model and try out a new method to reach the *end of the world*—however, from hearing the details, it didn't seem like there was anything concrete to it. Rather, he must have been searching for a way to persuade Aikawa-san.

"However—even then, for all this time—you couldn't

grasp the timing? From the way you said it, it didn't sound like you were together for just one or two days. It must have been longer, right?"

"Yeah. I also soon realized."

Aikawa-san said.

"That I let the timing slip—ten years ago."

"..."

Timing.

"If I were to kill him—I should have done it ten years ago. It seems I can't redo it."

That shitty dad—he really really really didn't care about me—Aikawa-san said.

"There was neither a retry nor a continuation. Killing him then—would have been the same as not killing him. Inside him—everything from ten years ago, except Akira, was over."

"...Was he that important? That Kajou Akira person."

"If Tokinomiya Jikoku was a companion for that shitty dad, then Kajou Akira was a partner, I guess. Something like that."

"Though Konomi-san—called him a *wraith*."

"If you're calling him a *wraith*, that shitty dad is equally one. If I take on your terms, I'm a vengeful spirit though."

"*Vengeful spirit*—"

"We can't have a great war with ghosts and apparitions, so—so, I completely let the timing slip. I realized that in the short while I accompanied him. 'Aah...**no matter how much I try**, I can't kill him.'"

Those words—

Felt like they were spit out with despair.

Aikawa-san and despair, they were too ill-matched—

however, that story was based on a time when Aikawa-san wasn't the Strongest yet, so it couldn't be helped.

Before being the Strongest.

There was such a time for Aikawa-san.

'I can't kill him.'

'I can't kill—my hateful nemesis.'

'Even killing him—it would be the same as not having killed him.'

'...I questioned if you could kill people in the first place though. Since you couldn't—kill Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"Idiot. Killing someone is simple."

Aikawa-san said.

"It's too simple—so I have to raise the difficulty level to make life fun, don't I?"

"That's impressive."

"I can't kill him."

Aikawa-san said.

"I can't kill him—even if I do, it would be meaningless. Therefore—I realized. My role, the role I should accomplish for myself, the one job I should do for myself, a job not contracted from anyone else—had already been done ten years ago."

"..."

"Therefore—that's your job now."

Aikawa-san said towards me.

"The one bearing the role of stopping Saitou Takashi—Humanity's Worst, is no longer me—it's the one he calls his enemy, you, the Nonsense User."

"..."

"I'll help you."

That too, it had been a while—

Aikawa-san smiled malisciously.

"That's the first condition—I'll beat up Magokoro, so you go beat up Saitou Takashi. The only one able to stop him—is you now."

"...Yes."

I nodded.

I—

I arrived where I was supposed to—If Aikawa-san learned that the fox-masked man and I had already entered the domain where one of us had to die—would she stop me?

Would she tell me not to kill him?

Would she tell me not to get killed?

...She probably wouldn't.

Even if she thought it—she wouldn't.

It wasn't like Aikawa-san blindly cherished life. When you should die—she clearly tells you to.

For me—

That was precisely this kind of scene.

There was worth to—betting my life.

It's just, even then—I understood why Aikawa-san had that strange attitude ever since our reunion, but that was the same for the fox-masked man—the fox-masked man's strange behavior that Konomi-san pointed out still couldn't be explained. It was surely something about Magokoro, about Magokoro and Jikoku-san—but as Konomi-san said too, that wasn't enough to be sure.

"What do you think about that?"

"Who knows...he was the same as usual when I was with him. Certainly, after Magokoro's *rampage*...no, *release*? After that happened, that shitty dad's behavior became weird."

"Would Kajou Akira's death—be related to that?"

"No idea. However—maybe that shitty dad saw it."

"Saw?"

"*The end of the world—the end of the Story*."

Aikawa-san said.

"In manga, when reading the last volume, you can pretty much, like, see the remaining developments, right?"

Worthless—he said.

Of course, that might have been an assessment on the theory of Magokoro's release being the end of the world—however, what if that wasn't all?

What if there was another meaning included?

If he really—

Then, from which point did the fox-masked man—overlook and see it all?

"That person—how much of it was within his expectations, I wonder? Jikoku-san's actions towards Magokoro seemed to be completely outside of his reading, but—thinking back on it, since the first time we met...he knew beforehand..."

Beforehand—it was like he had expected it.

Like he had understood everything.

Like he had seen it—through its very last moments.

“It kind of felt like that."

"Who knows. Maybe he just wasn't thinking of anything."

Aikawa-san made a forced smile.

"Well, anyway, the end is near—let's stay fired up a little more, Nonsense User."

"Yes—Jun-san, what are you going to do afterwards? After—everything is over."

"Ahn?"

"I guess you're going to continue your contractor job?"

"You don't even need to ask—that's like my calling. No, not that—it's my role as someone created as a *limb*, I guess."

"Even if you know you can't kill him...you don't intend to become Mr. Fox's *limb*?"

"No way."

Aikawa-san said.

"...Hm. In reality, I was a little—yeah, as you and that pretty boy were worried about, I thought reconciling with that shitty that might have been an option...cause it's not like we were on bad terms from the start."

Therefore—

Recently, it felt like returning to that time.

Aikawa-san said—

And showed a slightly grieving expression.

No, not grieving—

Simply nostalgic.

Of the time before she became the Strongest.

"Maybe since I had that dream...that he could reform, it's as everyone says, that I'm a soft person. It's fine. That's how I am. More importantly—rather than me, how about you, huh?"

"Eh?"

"Whacha gonna do—no matter the result, in the end, the war between you and that shitty dad will be concluded. It's the end, Nonsense User. After everything ends—what will you wish for?"

"..."

The end.

After everything—ends.

It was just a proposal for a summer job. Assistant

Professor Kigamine setting her eyes on me—that was the start of my meeting with the man wearing the fox mask.

"...I."

"After that, can't you return to your daily life? These last few months have been rough, but—no, of course, your life has been rough since even before meeting that fox jerk—but can't you draw an approximate line between happiness and misery? You'll finally—be able to return to a normal lifestyle, won't you?"

"Honestly—I just feel like isolating myself on a mountain, though."

"What? Are you concerned about what Kazuhito told you? You should just—"

"No, of course, that's part of it—but."

But.

That had nothing to do with me.

That small detail—had nothing to do with me.

"Because—I don't have Kunagisa anymore."

I said.

"In the first place—I only had Kunagisa in mind. Kunagisa was the genesis and everything. No...though I was grandly rejected, but—even then, if Kunagisa wished for it, even now...I would throw away everything I care about and give up on everything I want."

"..."

"To the point you could call everything else a replacement for her—but, even then, she is no longer—at my side."

No longer.

Kunagisa was...no longer.

Really—why is that?

Kunagisa released the spell she had on me.

At the very end, she released me.
However...
Even if she didn't do that, I.
Even if I was restrained with chains—
"Just being by your side...was enough for me."
Then why—
Why did she ask for something like dying together?
It's not that, is it?
The words you should have directed towards me—
It shouldn't have looked like that, right?

"If you had told me to live with you—I would have jumped off without a second thought."

Now—Kunagisa was no longer.
I wasn't even sure whether she was living or not now.
Quite a bit of time had passed since then.
She might have died by now.
Kunagisa Tomo might have died.
I wasn't even allowed to know that.
Therefore—
"Therefore—to be honest, from here on I don't know...how I should live. I didn't think there would have been a future after parting with Kunagisa... On top of that, in my mind, I don't even know if there's a future after—saving Magokoro."
"Why don't you just redo it?"
Aikawa-san—
Plainly said those words.
"By Kunagisa-chan rejecting you—and by you rejecting Kunagisa-chan, all the buttons that had been wrongly pushed up to now have been removed, right? Then—why don't you start again from the start?"

"...You make it sound easy. But now, Kunagisa..."

"As if I could say it easily."

"..."

"Aah, when was it again—I heard. That Kunagisa-chan didn't have long to live. But—it's not like there was no way to make her survive, was it?"

"..."

That's—she said it.

With a number that wasn't a percentage.

"Things with a one in a million chance can happen on the first try—that goes for one in a billion too. I don't believe even for a second that Kunagisa-chan died, you know?"

"...You are—"

You are really—strong.

I—realized that once more.

Even covered in dirt.

Even covered in blood.

You are truly—the Strongest.

"...Unlike the Orange Seed, Omokage Magokoro and Overkill Red, Aikawa Jun, created to be the excellence of humanity... Kunagisa Tomo was born naturally, a product of coincidences and an inevitability, a genuine and pure blooded Blue," I said. "Since she is natural—she has a bad balance. Frankly, the worst. Her talent is too one-sided. Living on is difficult—more than that, it's normally impossible. However, with her excellent talent, with the excellent parts of her talent, she made up for it. She cast chains on herself...and unconsciously made herself a personality. The result of that was a work of art, a creation not of humans but God, and a creation of herself too—the Blue Savant, Kunagisa Tomo."

Pure-blooded and pure-bred from birth—
She couldn't have been more pure.
Mesmerizing many people—
Making the lives of many go awry.
An extraordinary genius.
An extraordinary existence.

"Therefore—it's not like there are no means. If—Kunagisa abandoned most...no, all of her talent. Throwing away the proof of recessiveness—is something she can do intentionally. She is—a natural, and like the Orange Seed, she can control herself completely. She can manipulate her own nerves—I'm sure she could even stop her heart through pure will. But—that's a painful decision for her."

I mean—
That would mean losing everything.
Everything she currently has,
Everything she had built up to now, losing it all.
Everything important—and everything she wanted.
Lose everything.
Could she do it?
Was Kunagisa attached to this world enough—
To allow that?
For her, a fundamentally greedy and possessive girl—
Wouldn't she prefer throwing away her life,
Than losing everything she possessed?
No, in the first place.
Was dying—
For Kunagisa, something to rebuke?
Perhaps...
I couldn't deny that thought.
Noise-kun's words came back to me.
Kunagisa Tomo—from the start.

Didn't she—feel like dying?

Since before I started to change.
She couldn't hold me in place.
No, in the first place—
Ever since that day six years ago.
Ever since she met me—at that sandbox.
Then...
That would mean, I.
"For Kunagisa—what in the world was I?"
"Who knows. Don't ask me. That kind of stuff—ask her in person," Aikawa-san said. "Reminds me...about Kunagisa-chan's talent...about the vessel for her talent, your little sister became a sacrifice, right? Though I don't really know... At first, didn't you pretty much resent Kunagisa-chan? Why—where did that change? Your hatred wasn't so light that it turned into love like in a cliché shoujo manga, right? Regardless of whether Kunagisa-chan was also a sacrifice for the Kunagisa Syndicate in a sense—that shouldn't have had anything to do with you, right?"
"..."
"Or did you simply overlap her with your little sister? Didn't you also—just overlap Magokoro with Kunagisa?"
"Now all of that is from pretty long ago—I no longer know what was true. All of it might be a wrong impression and just me following the flow on the spot. After all, memories end up dramatized no matter what—"
"Then, let me rephrase my question."
Then—
Aikawa-san said.
"Having been rejected by Kunagisa-chan—do you still

like her?"

"I love her."

I answered Kunagisa.

"I like her to an unpleasant degree—I love her to a hateable degree."

Aah...

How foolish.

How extremely pitiful.

In the end—it wasn't about that.

The curse Kunagisa cast on me was—

Even now—it still hadn't lifted.

"Then—you now have something to do after everything ends."

"No...but—that's like what happened ten years ago for Jun-san...I already let the timing slip away."

"I'm not like you two."

Aikawa-san said, as if it was natural.

"You two are still kids."

"..."

"So you can still redo it at least once."

"...I wonder."

Could we redo it?

Although it had ended—

Could we start anew one more time?

Can we say—"Nice to meet you" for the first time?

As long as I lived.

As long as she didn't die.

As long—

As long as she wished to continue living.

As long as she chose life.

"Yeah. I'll put in a coin for you. So—promise me. That's another condition for me to take on your job. After

everything ends—go see Kunagisa-chan. Then talk to her once more. The **ending** between you and Kunagisa-chan—won't end up like that. I won't admit it."

Aikawa-san smiled fearlessly.

Warping her lips to the fullest, squinting her eyes.

"Let's go with the royal road, the royal road. What are you doing, showing off your quirkiness? Let's end it normally. Normal is fine. Normal is the best for everything. It's the **ending** of a miserable guy like you and an unreasonable girl like Kunagisa-chan, you know—

—I won't accept anything other than a happy ending."

2

On that day's evening.

My destination, after having gone out for errands, was a meeting with Kouta-san.

"This is what you requested", she handed me a white paper box.

That was a combination of iron and gunpowder.

A 41AE.

And a dozen bullets, meant to kill people.

ACT 23 - THE END OF
THE STORY
SAITOU TAKASHI
WORST

0

Goodbye.

1

The stage for the decisive battle was Sumiyuri Academy.

Among the ruins that had already met their end.

In the second gymnasium—

There were four people, all silent.

As if to replicate the scene of that day—

As if to redo it all over again.

Saitaou Takashi and I were on the stage.

Aikawa Jun and Magokoro were,

In the center of the gymnasium—facing each other.

Facing each other at a certain distance.

Existing.

Existing there.

Silently.

Existing—together.

Until now, I hadn't heard anyone's voice. Of course, my own voice included. Driven by Aikawa-san in Emoto-san's borrowed car, we arrived at Sumiyuri Academy. By that time—

Those two were already there.

Saitou Takashi and Omokage Magokoro.

Although I did not put it into words, I was a little surprised when I saw them. Saitou Takashi didn't wear his

trademark fox mask from the very beginning—he wasn't even holding it in his hand. It exposed his features—the ones that looked a lot like Aikawa-san's.

Then, looking at Magokoro—her hair color that had once looked like the color of rust had splendidly reverted back to the shiny orange that it was before.

Orange, twine-like braids.

Her once dirt-stained body was now spotless, as if the scene I had observed at the Kitano Tenmangu two days back had been an illusion all along.

Black shorts and a black, tight shirt.

Barefoot.

It was almost identical—completely like a recreation of that scene.

Like—

Like when I was reunited with Magokoro here.

Except for one thing. The black circles under her eyes still remained. They hadn't disappeared—perhaps that indicated that Magokoro hadn't slept since then.

That reminds me—

At that time, Magokoro had easily beaten Moeta-kun, Houko-chan, and Izumu-kun—three *Killing Names*, while half asleep.

Still bound by the chains.

Using less than half of her power.

And, the person who awakened Magokoro for an instant—was now standing in front of her. Humanity's Strongest Contractor—Overkill Red, Aikawa Jun.

Of course—

Needless to say, I hadn't forgotten that Aikawa Jun was struck down with a single blow from Magokoro, who wasn't even using half of her power.

I hadn't forgotten—

However, seeing Aikawa-san stand in front of Magokoro with a victorious smile, it almost felt as if that scene had never occurred in the first place at all.

On the other hand, Magokoro was expressionless.

Maybe because of the bags under her eyes, her expression looked even worse than usual—she was just quizzically staring at Aikawa-san. No, that reminds me—at that time, when Magokoro was stepping on Aikawa-san, she had an expression like she couldn't quite accept it, didn't she?

The fox-masked man—

Was looking at these two, seeming extremely bored.

Looking at his own daughter and granddaughter.

In a state like that—

Only the passage of time ensued.

In the deep night, when the grass and trees had fallen asleep.

Without a single sound.

Almost as if—everyone had forgotten why they came here in the first place.

I wonder if they were feeling it.

That, regardless of the conclusion—something critical would be decided here—did everyone share that feeling?

At least I did.

Unsigned hidden under my jacket.

The gun, inserted in the back of my jeans.

The anti lock blade—I didn't need it anymore.

"Hm."

Eventually—

Finally, the fox-masked man spoke.

With a voice so small Aikawa-san and Magokoro couldn't hear—he said to me.

"Now—there should be no problem with the situation, right my enemy?"

"...Yes"

"Alright."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to confirm just in case—however, my enemy," The fox-masked man said. "Last time, my daughter survived—only because she was lucky. You know that, right?"

"..."

"The battle will continue until any one of them is unable to fight anymore—after that, the connection that existed between you and me will end. Hm. When I think about our connection being severed, it feels refreshing."

"Well said."

Unable to fight—

In fact, that was exact.

We came all this way.

So we probably wouldn't stop now.

Nonstop, until we reached the last station.

There wasn't anyone here who could stop that.

Last time, Izumu-kun had kind of stopped Magokoro—but now, without Kino-san, Rurero-san or Jikoku-san, once started, it would be unstoppable.

Neither me nor the fox-masked man.

Neither one of us had the power.

The Weakest and the Worst—couldn't stop the Strongest and Last.

Suddenly, a concern appeared in my heart.

The same concern as usual.

Though the same as usual, with even more attachment than usual.

Wouldn't I have made it in time now?

Would I still—have been able to stop it?

If I didn't want to see.

If I didn't want to take responsibility.

I could just run away like usual.

"What's wrong?"

The fox-masked man asked.

"If you want to stop them—I'll help, you know?"

"—Certainly not."

I answered.

As if trying to erase all the concerns I had.

"Rather—please don't forget the promise."

After saying this, as if declaring war—

I closed my mouth and looked forward.

The senses of Aikawa-san and Magokoro were out of the norm. No matter how quietly we spoke, there was always a possibility for them to overhear our conversation.

I wanted—to avoid that.

I mustn't let that influence them.

I shouldn't mix impurities.

I shouldn't mix unnecessary things.

Wrong.

This was definitely not a battle for my sake, nor for the fox-faced man's sake, nor for the world's sake, nor for the story's sake.

This was—

A battle for Magokoro's sake.

A battle for Magokoro's sake, and—

"...Yo"

Then—

Magokoro, spoke.

Her voice was no longer hoarse.

It changed back—to her usual voice.

"Are you—that, my **ingredient**?"

Of course, the person Magokoro was talking to was—

The one in front of her, Aikawa Jun.

There was only her.

"Though it's faint—I don't remember it, but I remember it. I—punched you a lil bit."

"..."

Aikawa didn't answer.

She answered Magokoro with an unresponsive silence.

"To tell the truth, I don't really get it—why do I have to fight an outdated version like you at this point? I let myself get enticed by Ii-chan's logic, but I don't think any of this has meaning. I have long surpassed the likes of you —"

Magokoro glared at Aikawa-san—and said that with plenty of hatred.

"However, even then—I still don't like you. Completely displeasing. After all—if you never existed, I wouldn't have had to exist. Yeah, I'll be honest—I despise you. Overkill Red Overkill Red Overkill Red Overkill Red! That name, I heard it countless times at the ER3. Can you imagine how irritating that was?"

"..."

"Why did I have to suffer that kind of treatment—for the sake of an incomplete product like you? If only you had been more proper, something like me wouldn't have had to be born. Because of being born in this world—can

you understand how much boredom I had to go through, can you imagine it?"

Magokoro—

Spit her words, as if cursing.

Like she stopped chaining herself.

Like she stopped oppressing herself.

As if—venting out at her.

As if putting all blame on her.

As if blaming her grudge on her.

As if achieving her vengeance.

Overlapping words with words and words.

"And it's not just me—apart from me, how many people do you think were sacrificed? My case was still fine—because I still had Ii-chan. I had a sliver of salvation. However, there were five thousand more people who didn't even get my level of salvation. All of them—suffered because of you and died because of you. All of it—was because you—you...weren't proper."

What hurt Magokoro's chest the most—was that point.

No matter what kind of treatment she received,

No matter how much suffering she tasted,

The fact that herself wasn't even at the bottom of the barrel.

Therefore—the Orange Seed.

Magokoro, who was called that.

Towards Aikawa-san—

"I can't forgive you."

"..."

Aikawa-san—still hadn't spoken anything.

Still, nothing.

As if she was spoiling Magokoro—she took in her

words.

Silently.

Her expression—became a shadow. I couldn't see it.

"I'm sort of your **sequel**—and I surpassed you in all kinds of domains. However, even then—the guys from the ER3 repeated 'Not enough', 'Not enough', and blamed me. As a result of that—I died once. Engulfed by flames—I died."

Died.

Died.

I died.

Magokoro said.

She hadn't—forgotten.

There was no way she could forget.

The moment she died.

"I have no memory of being born—I have no idea why I was born. This world is much too simple, and much too empty. For me, whether this world exists or not, it's the same. Presence and absence are equal in value. Even if that world just hadn't yet started—I wouldn't care at all."

That was the first time—

The first time I saw Magokoro talking this much.

In the first place—

Magokoro wasn't really the talkative type.

With how many—

With just how many feelings—

Was she now facing Aikawa Jun?

It wasn't because I deceived her into this.

It wasn't—because I wheedled her into this.

That was of her own will.

Magokoro's—true thoughts.

Magokoro.

Just that.

"Try to say something—outdated. You must have something to tell me, don't you?! Why did I—why did I have to go through all of that!? Why is it that I'm living right now, tell me! No, not that—tell me if I'm even living!"

"...Hahn."

There.

Aikawa-san sighed.

Towards Magokoro—deeply, she sighed.

Looking extremely bothered, scratching her head.

Then—

She looked at Magokoro.

"I don't really care, but you know...isn't referring to yourself as 'ore-sama' in this day and age quite out of fashion?"

"...!"

"Stop babbling about all this shit, you—do you think spouting annoying gloomy stuff will get you some pity?! My fault? As if I care. Are you stupid?"

Aikawa-san—

Said in an extremely malicious way.

"If you're bored of living, I'll properly kill ya. So come at me, ore-sama-chan."

"—AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

That was—the spark.

Magokoro started moving.

Like on that day.

Exactly like—that time.

The next thing I noticed—before I could notice, she

had already jumped in front of Aikawa-san, binding both hands in a fist raised above her head.

She—swung down her fist.

It burst on Aikawa-san's cranium.

However, this time, unlike last time, she should have been able to dodge it—last time, it was when Aikawa-san moved to attack that she got cleanly hit by Magokoro's fist in a counter.

This time—Aikawa-san should have been ready to receive it.

She shouldn't have been hit twice by the same attack.

However—

Even then, that attack landed.

Jolting—Aikawa-san's head.

"...!"

With a jolt.

On the verge of collapsing—

On the verge of collapsing, Aikawa-san stopped her fall by taking a step.

With her legs spread wide like a crab.

She held on.

"**Now—we're even**."

Aikawa-san—said that, and smiled.

Looking at Magokoro, she smiled.

"Well then—ready, action!"

With her legs still open—she twisted only her upper body, she launched a palm heel attack towards Magokoro's stomach which was still in the air.

Even Magokoro had no way to brace herself in the air, so like that, she was pushed back to her original position—however, while being pushed back, she skilfully spun in the air—and ended up landing cleanly and beautifully on

both her bare feet. If you move in the same fashion as a cat, revolving in the air isn't impossible—therefore, it's not a surprise for Magokoro to be able to do it, however—

Unrelated to that.

Unrelated to that, to my surprise.

Although she staggered one more time, after redressing her posture Aikawa-san—showed no sign of damage.

She smiled—fearlessly.

"...How...even though it's the second time, unlike last time, Magokoro shouldn't be under a spell anymore—"

"Hm."

The fox-masked man lightly snickered.

"Well...that should be about right."

"Eh?"

"Don't worry and just look—it'll get interesting now."

The fox-masked man indicated to me to look ahead with a motion of the jaw. I returned my gaze there—by that time, Magokoro wasn't in the same place.

This time, she didn't jump.

Brandishing one arm—her left arm, with all her might—she rushed towards Aikawa-san, as if ramming against her.

That was—Izumu-kun's *Eating One*!

An impossible to evade attack of absolute destructive power—

"Kukukuh—as I said, the damage and appearance are flashy, but precisely because of that, it's too futile—weren't you the one to break through that technique, Magokoro?"

The fox-masked man laughed evilly.

As if he was having fun.

Aikawa-san didn't seem to be ready to take the hit this time, she rushed in on the straight line Magokoro was charging on—then, she spun her body backwards, and as a result of Aikawa-san heading in the wrong direction, the timing of the attack was somewhat off, so she hit the interior part of her elbow—of her own elbow.

Thump.

Magokoro's *Eating One* bent in a strange direction, a direction so off you might think she was aiming in the wrong spot—and swung in the air.

"Guh, uuuuh—!"

Magokoro—

She raised a voice twisted in pain.

"Aah..." Then, the fox-masked man said. "So you can cancel it like that... I see. Yeah, because, after all, it's just a joint. It's easy to twist in the direction it's supposed to. Doing that, the energy you lost will rampage in your body, huh?"

"..."

What...?

This person, was he calmly doing play-by-play commentary?

Even though, if Magokoro lost—

He would die.

"Guh... Ooooooooooh!"

However, naturally, Magokoro wouldn't get disheartened with just that—

This time she extended both arms.

An *Eating One* from both hands!

Feasting!

Then—she couldn't avoid it like earlier.

If she couldn't—

However, even then, you can't deny its huge drawbacks. Aikawa-san extended both her beautiful legs in a high kick—however, that wasn't intended as an attack. She kicked Magokoro's left collar with her toes—

And jumped backwards.

Of course, there was no way Magokoro's arms would be longer than Aikawa-san's legs. In the first place, *Eating One* was able to settle in as Izumu-kun's sure-hit kill technique because of his abnormally long arms.

Both *Eating One* only swung down on air.

Because of all the momentum, Magokoro lost her balance.

Then, Aikawa-san jumped back into Magokoro's personal space—and again, twisting her upper body, she did the same palm heel attack as before, as if replaying the same scene, though with both hands this time.

Just looking at it—

Just looking at it made me feel like my organs were being twisted.

Tap, tap, tap.

Magokoro, carried by the momentum—retreated three steps.

"Kah... Ahah...!"

"Hey, hey, ore-sama-chan—what happened? Is that orange hair a decoration? Are those orange eyes just marbles? Hahah—or is it that, in the end, orange can’t beat red-"

"...SHUT UP! Don't talk so arrogantly, outdated!"

Magokoro—

Didn't wait for her damage to recover, and stepped in up to Aikawa-san with her posture still low—and launched a direct strike.

Just a strike.

However—that was the fist which had killed Izumu-kun.

In pure destructive power, it rivaled *Eating One* and surpassed it—Omokage Magokoro, the Orange Seed's strike.

Aikawa-san, however, didn't try to avoid it. Without avoiding it, she—made the same strike, as if giving a refund.

An exchange.

As a result—

Magokoro's fist didn't reach Aikawa-san.

Aikawa-san's fist reached Magokoro's cheek.

The gap—in reach.

An overwhelming gap in reach.

Adult and child—

No, even bigger in terms of stature.

Due to Newton's third law, all the momentum behind Magokoro's fist returned to her. That damage was inimaginable.

Although inimaginable, without paying it much mind—stepping even more in, Magokoro's other hand headed towards the open Aikawa-san in a semi-hook-straight form.

But, Aikawa-san only retreated her legs a little.

With that—she didn't reach anymore.

Even after stepping in more, she didn't reach.

Aikawa-san's previous kick landed on the solar plexus.

She precisely aimed for a vital spot.

Even Humanity's Last—even if she could control her heart's movement at will, she couldn't control the position of her vital spots. If her solar plexus was hit, her

body would receive appropriate damage.

"Ugh—Ooooooooooooooh!"

Magokoro—roared with all her might.

Then, from here on, it became a slugfest.

There was no sign of it ending with one strike. They just unleashed a continuous stream of hits in order to make the opponent flinch—

Using strikes and kicks, rampaging with both fists and legs—

Without any regard for defense.

Neither one of them were thinking of protecting themselves.

A slugfest—

No, it eventually became a mudslinging fight with the numbers of attacks piling up.

"..."

It left me—speechless.

Did I instigate something absurd—as expected, the usual regret pressed in further. The terrible feeling of regret from having lighted the spark to the critical battle deciding the end of the world—pressed in further.

The fox-masked man glanced at me from the side.

With an expression—not letting on anything special.

He could seem as if he was having fun—

And inversely, he could look very bored.

"...Hm."

It's not like he noticed my gaze—but the fox-masked man reformed his sitting position.

"When it comes to this kind of battle—my daughter has the advantage over my granddaughter."

"Eh..."

Thinking about it—he was right.

Because it was a contest on a level so high I couldn't fathom spreading before me, I couldn't follow each and every blow's direction—however, even then, when I tried to properly look at it, it was evident.

Thinking about it, it was natural.

The length of her limbs—

Her legs were about twice as long.

If Magokoro wanted to land a strike, she had to be considerably close to Aikawa-san. On the other hand, regardless of how easy it was for Magokoro to get into Aikawa-san's close range, Aikawa-san didn't let her make that distance.

The difference in body size wasn't simply a difference in strength.

Magokoro blew away Moeta-kun with just her arms and managed to open Izumu-kun's stomach—

But.

Even then—

There was nothing she could do about her absolute shortness.

Only that factor—wouldn't change.

No matter how much power Magokoro's attacks held, it didn't mean anything if they didn't land—no matter how fast Magokoro's attacks were, that didn't mean anything if they didn't reach their destination-

At most, the airflow generated would sway Aikawa-san's clothes.

She was far from reaching Aikawa-san's neck—at most, she could touch her clothes.

Of course...

That went for Aikawa-san's attacks too. Since she had to continuously dodge Magokoro's attacks, she couldn't

put much power behind her own—you could say it was close to restraining herself.

Not a decisive blow.

Magokoro's ability to get hit, in other words, the endurance of Magokoro's body was, as all her other parameters, off the charts—that impregnable wall wouldn't fall.

However...

From looking at the current situation.

No matter how you looked at it—Aikawa-san had the advantage.

Aikawa Jun surpassed Omokage Magokoro.

"...Why? Before—when they fought before, it was such a one-sided massacre, so how..."

Was it true that Aikawa-san was careless at that time? Having Magokoro in front of her—seeing her own successor, was she at a loss? Of course that was a strike close to a surprise attack.

However—

What I felt at that time in the spectator seat, as an observer, that overwhelming decisiveness, I—couldn't feel it.

I couldn't feel that unsurmountable wall.

I wonder why.

Even though Magokoro was now—completely released.

"Oi oi—" The fox-masked man said with a forced smile. "That's natural, my enemy. Get yourself together. Didn't you set up this burlesque theatre scene because you thought that my daughter would put up a good fight against my granddaughter?"

"Of-of course, but—but."

"It's simple."

The fox-masked man said.

As if it was really a simple and obvious thing.

"My daughter was still—restraining and binding herself with a spell—isn't it just that?"

I can't really exert my full strength.

At some point—Aikawa-san told me so.

In that sense, even as the Strongest—

The existence at the summit is boring.

Therefore—

She relied on me.

Then, in this situation—I answered Aikawa-san's expectations straight on, was that what it meant?

However, even if that was true—

Aikawa-san was still the one—

Who knew Magokoro's state of mind the best.

She knew the emotion of not feeling alive—the emotion of wondering whether you're alive or not.

"..."

Then—why was it?

Why was Aikawa-san—

Always and always and always...

Smiling so much?

Why did she get angry at every little thing?

She became mad at boring things.

Amused herself with trivial things.

As if the world—was her playground.

Even myself—

Even something like my existence, even something like my deviance that was shirked by Teruko-san, Muimi-chan, Kazuhito-san and everyone else—

Why was she able to accept it?

To be able—

To get along with this world?

What was different?

Between Aikawa-san and Magokoro—

Between Aikawa-san and me, what was different?

"Tgh—"

Magokoro's body—harshly flew backwards.

The palm heel hit her lungs this time.

Not breathing for some time was nothing for Magokoro, but apparently it was sufficient to make her retreat back with just the inertia of the hit.

Then, one more palm strike—she jumped.

No...

This one, did she jump back on her own?

That was what Magokoro didn't show even in the previous fight—a defensive move.

A move done just to dodge.

Maybe that was why Magokoro was shaken on the inside. The moment she landed, there was a faint but long enough gap that even I could notice.

Without fail, Aikawa-san used that—at least, she could have. However, instead—she released the alertness of her palm striker. "Hm," she completely abandoned any posture.

While Magokoro was correcting her posture with a puzzled look—

"—Mmh."

And.

Aikawa-san said, dissatisfied.

"For some reason—I can't laugh."

"...Ah?"

"It's not quite fun—it's like I'm shaving to death

someone constantly on the defensive. I can't seem to laugh... This gap in reach feels a bit too *cowardly*—so I can't laugh."

Saying that—

Aikawa-san heavily lowered her body, bending her knees to a near right angle—her long arms too, she folded them so that her hands reached her chest and took a pose like a praying mantis.

Her point of view—was on the same level as Magokoro's.

They glared at each other—stronger than ever.

"Mm... Err, a bit more—right, like that. Now I can—laugh a little."

"What—are you doing?"

"Didn't I say I'd adjust my limbs and height to your level, ore-sama-chan—though doing it with my bust would be impossible."

"...!"

Magokoro—

Would get angry, I thought.

Would face Aikawa-san with anger, I thought.

Would let anger control her attacks, I thought.

However—

"Hah—ahahah."

She—laughed.

"Kukukuh."

Aikawa-san simultaneously laughed.

"Fufufu—"

"Hahahahah—"

"Hihihih—"

"Gerageragerage—"

Ra!

Magokoro jumped.

Not with anger dominating her.

At that time, there was no way for me to know what led her—however, at least, she didn't move with anger, hatred, or any sensitive emotion easily categorized as negative or positive—

Magokoro jumped at Aikawa-san.

Now the strategy of not letting her approach in a range where she could attack couldn't be used—no, strictly speaking, she could use it if she felt like it—but Aikawa-san chose a way where she wouldn't.

That was always the case—

That person.

She couldn’t stand it if she didn't stand on the same level as others.

That was certainly a handicap brought about by her being the Strongest—however, she should know that such kind thoughts were absolutely unnecessary for Magokoro.

Even then, she leveled the ground.

She made the opponent and herself—equals.

A fair and square chivalry spirit.

That wasn't kindness.

She wasn't trying to win with only her outstanding parts.

She was trying to win with her everything.

Therefore—the Strongest.

Aikawa-san avoided Magokoro's fist by bending her body. She opened her posture to avoid that straight attack and used the twisting motion to spring forth her own. Even though there was no fist to speak of, Magokoro's posture broke again.

Looking at it, I started to slowly get it—

Although Magokoro completely controlled her own strength, her own talent—the way she used it was too straightforward. They were straight attacks without any twist—as if she wasn't twisted.

That was also the case for Aikawa-san, but—

But, how should I put it... She was adjusting to her opponent.

Her way of moving had no freedom.

"From way back—"

The fox-masked man said.

"From way back, the stronger her opponents—the more my daughter got fired up. This much—is just natural."

"..."

"Last time ended so brutally, it was a bit of a letdown—but I guess she's doing her best for an old model. However-"

Crack—

An unpleasant sound—echoed throughout the gymnasium.

Looking in that direction—

Aikawa-san was holding her left shoulder and taking distance away from Magokoro.

Did she—dislocate it?

It seems she couldn't avoid Magokoro's fist, which had hit. It was just dislocated, so she probably didn't take it from the front. It looked like it'd just grazed her—however, that much power from just being grazed.

As I thought—

She was fundamentally an order of magnitude higher.

Even then, Aikawa-san—

"Ahahahah—now it’s getting fun."

She laughed.

Continued to laugh.

Really, from the bottom of her heart, with much fun.

"What about you—is it fun, ore-sama-chan?"

"..."

Magokoro—was still glaring at Aikawa-san with sanpaku eyes. However, her lips warped into a malicious grin,

"Not—bad."

She said.

Clink, Aikawa-san relodged her bone as if she was experienced in the matter.

Magokoro didn't try to make use of that gap. Rather, she waited for Aikawa-san to ready herself—then, she approached Aikawa-san using her footwork again, though slowly this time.

Aikawa-san lowered her hips—folded her limbs, adjusted her eye level to Magokoro and engaged in the fight.

An exchange of offense and defense—started.

Both offense.

And defense.

Mixed in—exchanging blows intricately.

Pleasant sounds.

Sounds so rough they were pleasant—resonated through the air.

These sounds—

How did they sound to Magokoro?

Neither of them were unhurt.

Losing blood here and there.

Even some teeth might’ve been broken.

Bones too—maybe one or two.

Their clothes turned into shambles during the fight.

Even then—the offense and defense showed no sign of slowing down.

Rather, it only became fiercer.

They were laughing.

Both of them—were laughing.

I didn't understand what they were doing.

It was as if—they were dancing.

Like an elegant dance.

Sweat scattered.

Splashes of blood flew.

For every attack—blood was spurted out.

That was such—

Such a beautiful—magnificent sight.

I couldn't resist—being enticed.

I couldn't resist—being overwhelmed.

"Hm—yo, my enemy."

The fox-masked man said.

"Now that it's come to this, boring developments will probably continue to unfold—how about it, want to go outside and talk for a bit?"

"Eh... But."

To avert his eyes—from this exchange.

To avert his eyes from this exchange, which seemed like it could last an eternity but would end in an instant, decide fate in an instant, even if it was the fox-masked man—I couldn't think him sane.

Boring...

Did he call this exchange that?

After all this—this man.

I instinctively, by reflex, looked at the fox-masked

man with a puzzled face... However he quietly—smiled.

With a face like Aikawa-san's, a smile like Aikawa-san's.

"Don't worry—neither of them will lose that easily. You could say this is a battle between a spear able to pierce any shield and a spear able to pierce any shield—there's no contradiction, so reaching a conclusion won't be easy."

"But...isn't Aikawa-san—"

"Yeah. It's true that up to now, I've seen many scenes where my daughter got defeated by *enemies*, countless times even—to the point she had more losses than wins in front of me. That's not a lie. But you see, my enemy. You can't forget. Unlike me or you, they're main characters to the core."

The fox-masked man said.

"From way back—she has never lost a second time to someone who defeated her once."

2

Descending down the stairs adjacent to the stage, going outside through the waiting room—we came out behind the gymnasium. The opposite way from where we came in at the end of September. At that time, Houko-chan and Izumu-kun were with us—but now, only the fox-masked man and I were here.

The sound of Magokoro and Aikawa-san battling—

Could be heard even from outside the gymnasium.

Considering the facility, they must have properly soundproofed it—but it felt like even the heat and splashes of blood were still able to reach us.

The fox-masked man—

"Hm."

Said that, then stood at a small distance from the gymnasium.

Standing as if he didn't care about me.

That was a little annoying, so I moved to a place where I would enter the fox-masked man's line of sight. As if staring at him.

The moon—

The moon in the shape of a zero could be seen behind the fox-masked man's back.

His kimono's silhouette was abnormal as well.

He somehow looked—ethereal.

The sound of the ruthless slugfest didn't add to that, but—if he was wearing that fox mask, he might have exerted an ominous ghost-like aura.

"What happened—to the fox mask?"

"I offered it to the dead."

"So that was the preparation you were talking about."

"After all, that was originally something akin to Akira's memento—though it seems my daughter didn't know. Had she known, she wouldn't have spent ten years searching for me. No—since we were both dead, it wouldn't have been that simple either, I guess. If you weren't there—me and my daughter would have probably never met."

"...What did you want to talk about?"

I said.

"At this point, we have nothing left to talk about, do we?"

"That's right, but you know—in one hour, one of us will depart from this world. I've already died once, so I'm not that afraid of death—but how about you?"

"Me...too. It's like I died," I said. "Though now I finally think that, if I could redo it—I would want that."

"Hoh."

"Aren't you thinking about that, Mr. Fox?"

"The only thing I wish for is the end of the world."

"...Since that first step of the *Thirteen Stairs*, that Kajou Akira person, died inside you—and you decided to disband the *Thirteen Stairs* alongside that—I thought you might have lost interest in the end of the world, but is that not the case?"

"..."

"Even if that was merely in the past—you called the *end of the world* where Jikoku-san *released* Magokoro 'worthless'—in the end, what did that mean?"

"It had no meaning. I just said it was worthless because it was—there was no additional meaning. Don't distrust me. Each and every word I say—it's all rubbish. Taking me

seriously would make you look like an idiot."

"Well that's probably true—parting in that way with the *Thirteen Stairs* that accompanied you through the final moments, Konomi-san, Rurero-san, and—Emoto-san. Also Misora-chan and Takami-chan, I think you must be crazy. These girls look the most like idiots among us all."

"What, was there a woman to your liking among them—then you can take her. I don't mind you having my hand-me-downs. The original shape of the *Thirteen Stairs* was only maintained because of Akira—now, without him, whether it existed or not—it's the same."

"Why did that Akira-san die?"

"..."

"Is it—my fault?"

"Maybe."

The fox-masked man said.

"To be more accurate—it's this situation's fault."

"This...situation?"

"Hm," The fox-masked said in a bored tone, "By the way, my enemy—there are two points I want to confirm with you. Is that fine?"

"Why not...I don't mind."

"*Unsigned*. Did you bring it here?"

"That's—just in case, yes."

"That's good. When I heard Magokoro had collapsed the apartment, I feared it might have been destroyed together with it."

"I had just taken out the minimum amount of baggage—so I was lucky."

Unsigned.

The anti-lock blade.

And—the gun.

"Yeah. Even if it's *Unsigned*, it's just a piece of metal in front of Magokoro. I'm relieved."

"...Originally it was Furuyari Zukin-san—the eleventh Furuyari Zukin-san's exchange material, right?"

"Exactly."

Although Emoto-san's *betrayal* was kept a secret, Zukin-chan's *betrayal* couldn't be hidden due to Misora-chan and Takami-chan's presence and Konomi-san's testimonial—so the fox-masked man ended up learning. Although even after learning, he didn't blame Zukin-chan's *betrayal*, nor did he blame Misora-chan and Takami-chan's independent actions. According to Konomi-san, it was something he knew from the start, or rather, something he was expecting—so naturally, Konomi-san wasn't criticized either. A whim of that level is plenty in the realm of normality, so he didn't especially pay it any mind-

"Err—about something that happened during your talk with Rurero-san..."

"Aah... At the time, you were under the bed like Axeman, right my enemy?"

"Axeman is nice. At that time, you evaluated Zukin-chan quite highly, but what was that about in the end? To me Zukin-chan was just a normal highschool girl."

"Aah... That, now it doesn't matter one speck—rather than appointing her to a step, that was more for custody. There aren't that many of her type. Precisely as you said yourself—the *normal* type, I rarely encounter them around me."

"..."

"You don't either, right? That kind of *normal*. That kind of resource is precious. I didn't think Rurero could

ever understand the feeling of yearning for *normalcy*, therefore I purposely made fun of her—but I certainly wanted at least one at my side."

Well, I guess she died immediately, though.

The fox-masked man said.

What came to mind—was the case in May.

My classmates—normal people.

Normal humans.

Emoto Tomoe.

Aoii Mikoko.

Atemiya Muimi.

Usami Akiharu.

Immediately after getting involved with me—there were casualties.

And ultimately—

It was like everyone died.

I wonder if it was similar to that.

"I'm sure that's what you and I are lacking the most—characters possessing the attribute of *normalcy*. Because we don't have that, because we lack that—we're forced to exert useless efforts. I thought she would accomplish an extremely important role in achieving the *end of the world*—but I shouldn't have made her join the *Thirteen Stairs*. Well, regarding that girl, *Unsigned* was just an aside—*Unsigned* only held meaning for the eleventh, after all."

"...If you want it back, I'll give it to you."

"It's fine. It's not mine, after all—want to hear its story?"

"If it's a short one."

"It's short. Short, simple, and tasteless. That blade was a memento of that old man's past lover. That lover was a blacksmith too, and apparently not too skilled of an

artisan, but that *Unsigned* was the only creation she accomplished by miracle. And similarly to the anti-lock blade that passed from Zerozaki Hitoshiki to Aikawa Jun to Ishimaru Kouta and eventually to you, it was in my daughter's possession."

Of course, that too—

Was unbeknownst to my daughter.

The fox-masked man said.

Aah—I see.

So that was why Zukin-chan didn't want to talk about it.

That was certainly a private matter—and in reality, like the fox-masked man just said, it was a tasteless, simple and short story.

Then—

"Then, Mr. Fox."

I said.

"If I survive, I'll bring it to the eleventh's grave—so if you survive, please do the same."

"..."

"If we don't—I would feel too bad for Zukin-chan."

It's like she—got swallowed up.

One step lower than the other *Thirteen Stairs* or the other people around me... That high level common girl got involved—

Because of the fox-masked man's selfishness.

And because of my own selfishness.

Therefore,

At minimum—I want to do that for her.

"There's no—meaning behind it, you know."

"I don't mind."

"Whether we do it or not—it's the same."

"I know."

"...Then, it's fine. I got it," The fox-masked man agreed. "That should be—a firm promise. I have a principle of only promising things I can do."

"Thank you very much."

Although I said that—

At this point, I wondered if the fox-masked man brought up the subject of *Unsigned* because of that, and I realized. He only reacted that way because he didn't expect me to make the proposition. If I hadn't, wouldn't he have brought it up himself?

I think that view was too close to lip service and too self-serving, but it wasn't just lip service—I felt in the fox-masked man's voice a duty to accomplish every little task he had left to do.

What could—that mean?

It was as if, it's like he was—preparing to die.

"The second thing you wanted to check—what is it?"

"Aah... No, you don't need to get so tense about that. It's truly just a verification. About the rules of the current situation."

"Eh?"

"If Magokoro wins, it's my win and I'll kill you—if my daughter wins, it's your win and you'll kill me. Right?"

"Yes—but what about it?"

"In case of a draw, what shall we do?"

The fox-masked man said.

"In case of an ex aequo, of double knockdown—or perhaps if both die, what to do... I just thought we hadn't decided."

"Aah—now that you mention it, we didn't."

"I don't think anyone would be satisfied without

anyone winning at this point—however, we can't really bring it up after the fight. What should we do?"

"Is it fine for me to decide?"

"Weren't you the one to bring this bet?"

"...Right."

I thought for a moment, then answered.

"In case of a draw, let's both die."

"...That's quite excessive. Are you fine with that?"

"Yes—originally, I didn't propose this bet in order to kill you. Between you and me—from the start, I was content as long as one of us died."

"..."

Just by one dying—

Even then, that's half of two people, so—

"So—for the draw, both of us dying would be the correct choice for this match."

"'The correct choice for this match'. Hm. In other words—" The fox-masked man said. "From the start—you had no possibility of losing, huh. If you or me—one of us, or even both of us—died, you would win."

"You're right—"

I said.

"—That's also true for Zukin-chan's case, but...we're too much of a nuisance. Both me and you. It would be fine if we were simply exceeding, like Aikawa-san or Magokoro—but although we can't reach them, you and me—we make our surroundings go crazy."

"Therefore, we should die. That's quite the pragmatic decision."

"I thought a lot about it before arriving at it though."

"You—so that's the reason you bet on my daughter?" He said. "So you—made the bet being prepared to die."

"No...that's wrong. My objective was to save Magokoro first and foremost. I used Magokoro as an excuse—so I need Aikawa-san to win or I'll be in a bind."

"But, weren't you surprised about my daughter progressing through the fight with preponderance?"

"After all, I had no grounds. It was surprising to me that everything seemed to go so well."

Then, I replied with a question.

"But if we're going there—what about you? What about you? If you had the data that Aikawa-san had never lost against anyone twice—shouldn't you have been the one to bet on your daughter?"

"..."

"Were you—intending to lose?"

"Certainly not," the fox-masked man smiled. "I still haven't seen the end of the world—the end of the Story."

"Then—why?"

"Because there is a gap in strength huge enough to overwrite this data. Therefore—honestly, I can't read the rest of this fight. Though in a short fight, Magokoro would undoubtedly win."

"..."

I see...

I got it.

I finally got it.

This person—he chose randomly.

When he was forced to pick between Magokoro and Aikawa-san, he probably randomly—picked Magokoro because of something like 'she won last time', without thinking anything.

Either way—it was the same.

Like for me.

I see, so that's what it was—

Being killed by me in this situation—
For the fox-masked man, it was the end of the world.

No...
Then wouldn't that way of thinking be too straightforward?
No matter what, wouldn't that be too simplistic?
There should have been other ways to reach this point. Also, the fox-masked man's will had nearly no influence on the current situation—how much of it did he see, literally—as us being swept by destiny?
As being swept away by the situation.
He said—'It's this situation's fault.'
Where was—the will in those words?
"For a bit—at the end, for a bit, let me tell you a ridiculous story—my enemy."
The fox-masked man said.
"Ten years ago—me, Junya, Akira, and my daughter—each of us confronted and killed each other for our own reasons—that looked a lot like this situation."
"This—situation?"
"**They're different but alike**—I wonder how. Like that Demonic Killer, Zerozaki Hitoshiki and you."
Izumu-kun didn't admit it, but—
Zerozaki and I were two sides of the same coin.
As if we were totally different—
But by contrast, very similar.
The same.
As if put in front of a mirror—
As if we were the mirror of each other.
Continuing indefinitely to no end, similar figures.

"As you already know to an unpleasant degree, what was used at that time was the one currently known as Aikawa Jun—the existence who collapsed causality. Because of that, I ended up exiled from causality."

"Yes—I've already heard that many times."

"At that time—my daughter was *released*. And that *release* was something she did on her own. My daughter succeeded in leaving her lock open."

"...That's..."

"At first, I thought that was the end of the world. An existence able to collapse all of causality and collapse all of destiny—I believed that was the Dying Epilogue. But it wasn't. Just having collapsed causality—that was immediately fixed and the bothers were cleaned up."

"..."

"Then—after that, I tried again countless times. I created the *Thirteen Stairs*, came in contact with various people, and tested every experiment I could think of. Then—I arrived at you."

The fox-masked man pointed at me.

"I met you, my enemy."

"...I—"

"However, at the end of that, I lost all my *limbs*—and I gained nothing."

"There's no way you didn't gain anything."

"There is. After all—the circumstances I finally arrived at after doing everything I could—

Were the same as ten years ago.

Then—no matter how much I struggle, that means I can only arrive **here**."

Back Nozzle.

Jail Alternative.

All of it—he said it himself.

I see... That's...ridiculous.

A much too—ridiculous punchline.

After causing so much trouble to others, after not caring about both enemies and allies, after involving many people—for that to be the conclusion... It's too cruel.

Not something that should be allowed.

"I have no intention to die. Until I see the end of the world. Until I see this world, this helplessly interesting world through to its end, I can't possibly die. I can't possibly die when I still have so many things I want to know. As if I'd die before I could stand before the end of the world. However, then—my enemy."

The fox-masked man said.

"How much longer will I have to continue living?"

"..."

"Having already—died."

He wasn't wearing a mask anymore, but—

I couldn't read the emotion on his face.

It was like everything—had gone extinct.

Kuchiha-chan.

He was in the same condition as—Madoka Kuchiha.

An undying girl.

Because she didn't live—the girl wouldn't die.

Of course, it wasn't like the fox-masked man had a peculiar essence like that girl—his body aged, his existence continued, and eventually he would rot away.

However...

On the aspect of not living, they were similar.

Also similar to—Magokoro.

They didn't feel like they were living.

I was reminded of Aikawa-san's words from the day before—'To be alive is to think you are alive.' Zerozaki's words too, doubled on that. If for Saitou Takashi, his raison d'être was only to observe the end of the world, to know the end of the whole world—

Right.

Ten years ago, even if he hadn't died—

It was like he had never been alive at all.

Aah...so it was **that**.

So it was **that**.

Then—it was more than despair.

Aikawa-san or Magokoro.

He didn't choose randomly, he just didn't choose.

Either one was fine.

The fox-masked man—was fine with either winning.

He was fine with betting on anyone.

Like me—this man had no way of losing.

I mean—for the fox-masked man not even living—both living and dying...really **were fine either way**—

Like—me.

We were the same.

Be it one person—or two people's half.

Me thinking that everything was fine as long as either me or Saitou Takashi died, and Saitou Takashi not caring whether he died or lived in the end—it was like we were the same.

What—

What kind of enemies were we?

"Enemies, huh?"

The fox-masked man said.

"For the first time—it feels like you truly, with your own will, from your heart, admitted to us being enemies."

"...That might...be true—but."

I—

Paused my words for a little, then said.

"I went to a certain island. An island where geniuses gathered. There—there was one murderer. I wasn't—in her sight. For her, I was merely a genius' belonging, merely an uncertain element, and merely part of the predestined harmony."

"..."

"I met a few college students. One said she liked me, one understood me, one hated me, and there was another one—but his interest was only in the other three. Not himself, just the other three. In the end, those four only created a permutation combination and finally became whole. I was only an uncertain element, and part of the predestined harmony."

"..."

"I barged into a school. It was in order to save a trapped girl. But that girl wasn't yearning for my help, and she wasn't even trapped. For her and even for the side that captured her, I was part of the predestined harmony."

"..."

"I arrived at a certain research facility. The researcher ruling it was, you could say, a loser. But that loser had high aims. He didn't bat an eye for me. For him, and for the people at this facility, I was merely an uncertain element, and part of the predestined harmony."

"..."

"I got hired by an assistant professor. She employed an

undying girl and worked towards a study of not dying. What she was yearning for was the back of her mighty master—and she really didn't care about me. For her, I was merely an uncertain element, and part of the predestined—"

Harmony.

Then—

"You were the only one."

I said.

"You were the only one—to call me your enemy."

"..."

"Valuing me, and only me, for my own worth. There was no end to the troubles and the enormous damage that resulted, and we even arrived at this, but—even then, just that—"

Just that—made me happy.

Happy enough to scare me.

"The one who's thinking of it as a fortuitous meeting—unexpectedly, might be me."

"...Don't say things you don't believe—just because it's the end. Or you'll soften the atmosphere."

After staying silent for a while, he said, sounding really annoyed.

"Archenemy—is it? Or rather, 'nemesis'."

"'I wish I had met you in a different way', don't say something like that. At this point—you and I can't become friends."

"I bet."

We both—did too much.

We had to end it here.

We had to part here.

From the start—until the end, we were fated to.

Therefore—

This should be correct.

"Now, I truly have nothing left to talk about, my enemy," The fox-masked said firmly. "What about you? Do you have anything else to tell me? Aah...you were the one who said you had nothing first, weren't you? Then—"

"To be honest... To be completely honest," I said. "I feel...like I haven't talked to you nearly enough."

"Is that so? Yeah. Me too, in reality."

However, the fox masked man continued.

"We need to return soon or—we'll miss the conclusion scene. We can't really permit that at this point. That's my true thought. Let's go back, my enemy."

"Yes—let's do that."

I felt like we left out too much.

And also like we talked too much.

Anyway—

Now, with that, it was the end.

The fox-masked man and I started to walk like it was nothing and headed back into the gymnasium. From the waiting room to the stage by the stairs.

Looking down at the gymnasium—

Those two weren't there.

Aikawa Jun.

Omokage Magokoro.

That reminded me, the sounds of hits had stopped for a while. Sometime during—my conversation with the fox-masked man, I couldn't hear them anymore.

"It looks like they moved elsewhere."

The fox-masked man said.

"Which one fled—which one pursued?"

"Fled?"

"Moved to a place where they have the advantage, I guess. This field clearly advantages my daughter so Magokoro probably fled. Hm—for that Magokoro to start using little tricks in a battle, I guess the conclusion is coming soon."

The fox-masked man swiftly turned to me.

"Soon, we'll both have to resolve ourselves."

"Resolve?"

"The resolve to kill, and the resolve to be killed."

"Putting the one for getting killed aside—resolve is unnecessary for killing, no? I think so, at least."

"Who knows. I think it's the opposite. The one getting killed is simply getting killed, but the one killing has to move by his own will."

"Mr. Fox, have you ever killed someone?"

"Enough to lose count."

The fox-masked man answered.

Then the fox-masked man asked me.

"My enemy, have you ever killed someone?"

"Enough to lose count."

I answered.

"With your own limbs?"

"What about you?"

"...That doesn't count as an excuse."

"Exactly, I agree."

We both jumped down onto the stage.

Then moved to the place where Aikawa-san and Magokoro had been repeating fierce exchanges until moments prior—the place looked like a flower of blood had bloomed.

This much blood—that would be enough for one, no, two people to die from hemorrhage. And not just that—

it's not like they attacked it directly, but by simply stepping, the step had dents like it were hit multiple times by a hammer. Even though this place had already looked like it was in ruins, now it looked like a carnage that attracted the eye.

"This way, then."

The fox-masked man said.

Looking in that direction, drops of blood could be spotted—continuing further ahead.

Until the exit of the gymnasium.

"It's like Hansel and Gretel."

Said the fox-masked as he followed the traces of blood. I followed him while thinking it was definitely not something so fairy-tale-like.

I exited the gymnasium.

Obviously, it was pure dark.

"My enemy. What about the flashlight?"

"'What about' you say—I didn't have one from the start."

"We have no choice then."

After that exchange, we meandered after the blood traces relying only on the light of the moon.

Midway through—nails and teeth had fallen.

I got somewhat frightened then.

I didn't want to think about who they belonged to.

"Hey—Mr. Fox."

"What?"

"Why—did you stop at Aikawa-san?"

"Stop what?"

"The ER3 System's MS-2. I don't really want to say that, but—even if Aikawa-san was a failure, instead of leaving the Orange Seed to others—of handing her to

others, had you created her, things wouldn't have come to this bothersome situation, no?"

"Be it a failure or a success, I never repeat the same thing twice. It seems you said that, didn't you?"

"Well, I did, but—but, I think that Jikoku-san's way of thinking wasn't completely wrong either. Even if ten years ago was a failure—had you used Magokoro really well, you might have reached what you call the *end of the world*."

"That kind of end—isn't something I want to see. That's not really an answer, is it?"

"So you're denying an end you don't like?"

"Naturally. Because I'm not a creator, but a reader."

The fox-masked man said.

The blood traces—

Continued into a building somewhat far away.

They penetrated the building from the glass windows.

The fox-masked man and I didn't have high enough athletic abilities to go in there after the blood traces, so we went around to a safe entry of the building and returned to the blood traces from there—then followed them.

The blood traces climbed the stairs.

From this point on—

The destruction resumed.

The building was broken here and there.

The stairs seemed like they would break under our feet.

Of course, that was—not destruction with the building's demolition in mind. That too, it was merely collateral.

How in the world—

Was this a fight between fellow humans?

The blood splatters—were like flowers.

Continuing up and up.

"Aikawa Jun and Omokage Magokoro—you can call them the peak of artistic creations. Created by not God but humans. You just called my Aikawa Jun, my daughter, a *failure*—however, she may be an outdated model, but she's certainly not a failure."

It might have been a failure, but she wasn't one—the fox-masked man said.

"..."

"Of course, Magokoro isn't a failure either. Both of them were hits that reached the highest level—my daughter being an outdated model and Magokoro being her successor means that, while they are in different classes, they are, in a sense, the same."

"Well—that, I can understand."

"Let me see... If I had to point it out, the fundamental and essential difference would be that the Orange Seed is a complete creation—and Overkill Red, an incomplete creation... Even then, the same is the same. But even then, you see—with just them, the world wouldn't let itself be ended. Although they possess existential power to rival the world—more than rampaging or being released, although they are inhuman enough to equal the whole of Humanity, even then—they can't rival destiny."

"Then—what do you mean?"

"You see, as you said, Jikoku's thinking wasn't wrong—it's no doubt that the moment I, Saitou Takashi, got the closest to the end of the world was ten years ago, when my daughter rampaged and was released. From Jikoku's perspective, that was probably right. I have no grounds to deny that either. Therefore—in regards to that, it was simply a matter of my preferences. I just didn't like it. Who cares, really."

"'Who cares'—is it?"

"Yeah."

The fox-masked man nodded.

"A matter of preferences."

Paaan.

Paaan, Paaan.

We heard the sounds of metallic objects hitting each other.

They were close.

These two...were close.

The conclusion—too, was very close.

In the hallway of the highest floor—

The Red and the Orange were facing each other.

With ten meters between them, plenty of distance.

Both of them—

Their bodies were full of wounds.

Out of breath.

Just breathing seemed painful.

Their whole bodies were covered in blood. Even Magokoro's blood turned red.

Neither of them were holding a stance.

Their arms hung loosely. No, were they broken? At least, they were turned in a weird direction and so swollen that I inadvertently nearly looked away.

Not only their arms, but their legs too.

How did they manage to stand?

Just the wind blowing seemed like it would make them collapse.

Even their fingers—didn't have a proper form.

Discolored parts all over their bodies.

Not just bruises, there were also many cuts and

stabbing wounds.

Every wound—was done by bare hands.

Wounds, wounds, wounds.

Because they were alive—they got hurt.

Wounds...are painful.

Wounds come with pain.

Pain.

Suffering.

Those wounds were, without a doubt—only those two's.

Omokage Magokoro was looking at Aikawa Jun.

And Aikawa Jun was looking at Omokage Magokoro.

With crushed eyelids and debatably functional eyes—

Glaring at each other.

Confirming each other.

Covered by blood,

Covered in wounds,

Feeling the other's existence, and only feeling that.

Neither I—nor Saitou Takashi, entered their field of vision.

Did they see anything?

Did they hear anything?

Regardless, they didn’t feel us.

In both their worlds—there was only their color.

Hurt all over—full of wounds.

Washing the opponent's blood with your own, exchanging the opponent's flesh with your own, exchanging the opponent's bones with your own—full of wounds.

Even the teeth to clench on were broken.

These proud and beautiful girls,

Their hair colors,
Their smooth skin,
Their refined faces—everything ruined.
Ugly.
Repulsive.
"..."
However—even then.
I didn't think of their appearance as ugly.
That was the highlight.
They were too—proud and beautiful.
Even more than anything I had seen until then—
More than any music, more than any movie, more than any novel, more than any picture—more moving.
My heart was moved.
It throbbed.

"Hi...hihihihi."
"Ka...haa...hahah."

Even then—
Both were at an incomparable level, but even then, if I had to compare—Aikawa-san's wounds were more severe than Magokoro's.
An essential—difference.
The difference between the outdated and the successor.
After coming all this way—it was decisive.
Even if Aikawa-san was progressing in a predominant and superior position, her basic stamina, regeneration, and all these kinds of things were dimensions apart—for Magokoro, if she acted normally, that would have indeed been shaving to death.
Shaved to death.
However—

Even then, Aikawa-san was laughing.

Those lips that spurted blood when opened,

Where laughing inappropriately, cynically—

And beaming with fun.

Magokoro too...she seemed in pain. However, as if empathizing with Aikawa-san's beaming smile, she forced herself to smile.

Right—

Magokoro seemed in pain.

I'm sure she couldn't comprehend it.

Why the Red in front of her—wasn't collapsing.

Why she wasn't retreating.

Why she wasn't running away.

I'm sure Magokoro couldn't understand.

For Magokoro—it was a difficult question.

For Magokoro, it wasn't simple.

The experience of *difficulty*—

For Magokoro, that must have been the first time in her life.

"—Magokoro."

I—unconsciously muttered.

"Are you currently—alive?"

Did you learn—what living was?

Are you thinking—that you don't want to die?

Then—

This feeling is yours.

That's the proof that you are living.

"My enemy."

The fox-masked man said.

"This is the last chance—if you still want to stop those two."

"..."

"You already achieved your goal, didn't you? If you force on Magokoro the same thing you did on Izumu-kun in August—if you want to teach Magokoro what Izumu-kun taught you—the result is already fulfilled."

"...Right."

That was...on point.

There was no need to put it in words, it was obvious to the eye.

"Then—now's the last moment. If it's now, either of us should be able to stop them. It'd be easier than ripping the wings off fireflies."

"...Unfortunately."

I said.

Things like the end of the world—like the end of the Story.

Like my life, like Saitou Takashi's life.

Regardless of those.

"Coming all this way—I can't do something so boorish."

"...Even if one ends up losing their life?"

"If that can become the proof that they lived."

I see, nodding—

The fox-masked man fell silent, as if he was exceedingly bored.

Maybe he got fed up.

Maybe he thought he couldn't follow up.

But...that probably wasn't it.

Anyway—

With that, the fox-masked man and I—

Faded in the background.

Only two were left.

Only two were present in this world.

Aikawa Jun and—Omokage Magokoro.

"...Yo."

Magokoro—said with a voice full of blood.

With a voice that sounded like a moan.

"Aren't you...bored?"

"...Mm."

Aikawa-san suddenly—

Took on a stance again.

Now she had given up on folding her limbs to adjust to Magokoro—she didn't have enough leeway left.

"My bad, my bad...I didn't have enough blood, so I got in a bit of a daze—heheh, it's been a while since the last time I lost this much blood. Might even be the first... Eh? What did you say? Care to repeat it once more?"

"I asked whether you were bored."

Magokoro said.

Not releasing her wariness.

If she relaxed—

She might have collapsed on the spot.

"Isn't living—boring?"

"..."

"You...with as much power as you, well, that's...even if you don't have as much as me, with what you have—the world is simple...right?"

Simple.

As if having easy additions being constantly forced upon you for your whole life, without a moment's rest—simple.

"Yeah—it's simple," Aikawa-san said. "There's no resistance, it's boring. There are only things that piss me off and the level is awfully low. Why isn't everyone else

doing things more properly—I can't understand. Every mind that makes up this world is boring, pisses me off, and annoys me, I can't put up with it."

"..."

"So I have no choice but to liven up things myself... Hahaha! With that worth, in most cases, I have more fun than I can possibly handle!"

Even now—is fun!

This world is truly magnificent!

Aikawa-san said proudly.

"How about you, is it fun, Orange Seed?"

"...You're crazy."

Magokoro said—along with a bitter smile.

"You're insane—doesn't this just hurt... It's painful and tough and hard and—

"—It just feels like I'll die, doesn't it?"

Magokoro smiled while crying.

"Finding this fun—you must have something wrong in your head—outdated model. Unfortunately, that program wasn't included in me... What in the world do you want me to understand from this slugfest—"

"It just means wives and tatami mats and the main character's personality are better when a bit outdated[4], Orange Seed—don't group an old model created in a peaceful age like you and a child like me that is the embodiment of war—you and I are totally different."

Totally different.

Aikawa-san—said so.

Like when Izumu-kun denied my resemblance with Zerozaki—she denied her resemblance with Magokoro.

She established it—each and every difference between

them.

The differences between the complete product—and the incomplete product.

"Feel like you'll die? That's nothing, then—aren't you living?"

"..."

"Also, aren't you stupid?"

Aikawa-san continued to talk.

"Fun things aren't always painful and tough and hard like this—something fun, you see, is much much much more fun. **What awaits you after this** is the real fun, isn't it? **This kind of thing** is ultimately just the start—compared to the time you'll dally with friends, this is really nothing. All this pain and toughness and anguish, all of it, the whole of it, you can bear it."

"Fr-friends."

"I have so many friends, you know? Even the Ii-chan you love is a super great friend of mine."

Aikawa-san said in a cynical tone.

With her usual—tone.

Along with her delightful smile.

"Of course, you're a friend from today onward too."

"...!"

"Let's do fun things together."

Magokoro—

Shivering like she was feeling cold, her whole body trembled. However, even after an expression like she couldn't feel any more pleasant—

Hop, she returned back into her low stance.

"We can't—become friends."

"Oi oi, you can't do me like that. You're so cold. I already decided, you know?"

"I mean, you—are going to get killed by me now."

"Nice, those caustic words... Yeah, come without restraint—be at ease, you won't die... I'll do my best—and hold back without mercy."

"I'm coming, loser."

"Come, winner."

The air—burst.

Sparks flew.

I heard the sound of static electricity exploding.

At the exact same time.

Magokoro and—Aikawa-san jumped.

With a speed that made me wonder where all this power came from, at the center of the straight line binding them, these two—

These two...crashed.

However, they couldn't use both their arms any more.

Neither were their legs able to rise.

Then at the end—with their body.

With just crashing their bodies.

Their whole bodies—their whole bodies and souls crashed.

The blood spurting from their wounds—were like screams.

As if it were their last moments.

Shaking.

They both bounced back behind, first stepping with leg to hold one—but even that was done unsteadily, swaying.

There was no longer a will there.

Feebly—and staggering.

Somehow, they tried to endure it—but it was too much.

Impossible.

Either one could have collapsed...at any moment.

However—

Aikawa-san who seemed to greatly collapse to the back forced a grand motion, and this time she was tilting to the front.

I thought she might collapse like that.

But,

"...AAAAH!"

Although there was a howl—

That was probably just a coincidence.

Neither necessity nor destiny—a coincidence.

Aikawa-san's arm, which couldn't move, by chance, grabbed Magokoro's neck, which was in front of her-

Then, Magokoro slipped on her feet.

On the blood-covered hallway-

With her bare feet that had no grip.

"...!!"

Raising a voice that didn't concretize as one—

With Magokoro pinned under Aikawa-san, both Omokage Magokoro and Aikawa Jun, went down together —

And fell down in the hallway of Sumiyuri Academy.

With Magokoro under—and Aikawa-san above.

Their bodies, which barely held on—not just the bones, mechanisms from all over their bodies—with an extremely unpleasant sound, seemed like they had finally broken.

Then-

Then, stillness.

"..."

"..."

Neither I—nor the fox-masked man had words.

There was not a single word to be said.
Everything—

We felt as if everything had ended.

But,
That stillness was just for a moment.
That split-second which felt like an eternity—
Was merely an instant.
"...Ghaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"
Using just force—leaving everything to force.
With her broken arms.
With her broken legs—Aikawa Jun stood up.
With unreliable feet,
Unsteadily wavering—
Even then, Aikawa-san stood straight.
Without borrowing anyone's shoulder—she stood up.
"...Ha, haha...hahah."
And—she still laughed.
She laughed—as if she was having fun.
Suddenly—
Aikawa-san directed her eyes towards me and the fox-masked man as if she just noticed us.
No—not me.
I didn't enter her vision.
The only one in it—
The only one in her world was the fox-masked man.
Saitou Takashi—her father, only him.
"Look—how about it, shitty dad."
Although she probably wasn't even conscious—
She said distinctly towards her father.
With a challenging look.
With a provocative smile, she said.

On the other hand—the fox-masked man.

Hm, laughed with his nose as usual.

"You were always the Strongest."

At that time—

I missed Saitou Takashi's expression.

"You are the daughter I'm proud of—who shouldn't be ashamed of anyone."

Don't admit it at a time like this, blockhead—

Muttering that.

Aikawa-san collapsed again on top of Magokoro.

I thought of rushing in—but stopped.

I didn't even have to worry myself... Aikawa-san unconsciously avoided Magokoro, and fell down as if protecting her. Magokoro lying face up - and Aikawa-san covering her up almost looked like they were hugging each other.

Though all covered in wounds.

However—they looked like a parent and her child.

"...Well, the amount of blood that differed with the body's size in the end of the end of the end—worked well for her. Even if Magokoro unconsciously released the *spell* from her mind," The fox-masked man—commented as he looked at them. "If they had the same body size, the winner could have been either."

The difference between an incomplete product—

And a complete product, huh?

"Aikawa-san didn't have any binding—at least, none of this sort, huh."

"She's had this nice body since ten years ago. Though that was my, Junya, and Akira's preferences."

"..."

You guys...

What kind of expectations did you have of your daughter?

"The chains Magokoro cast on herself were merely for her sake—my daughter's self-suppression had always been for other people's sake."

Therefore—

Therefore she's sweet, the fox-masked man said.

"Had she been able to exert that strength at the start of October, this story wouldn't have meandered about until now. Hm. In the first place, my daughter underestimates the world too much—she underestimates destiny too much. However... Even then, for you, it must have all happened as predicted, my enemy."

"Everything did go as expected—but it wasn't the best case scenario. Even if the story advances along the plot, it's still disheartening if that happens through last resort plans."

I said.

"I was also taught by Izumu-kun this way—however, that was only a temporary measure. The true hardships will only start now."

"Hm."

"I'm not thinking everything will go well the first time. But, for starters—Magokoro won't leave Aikawa-san's side."

"Agreed. No matter how much you search through this world, no one but Aikawa Jun—can treat Magokoro as her peer. But whether that's a good thing or a bad thing..."

"It's not a bad thing."

"Hm. You can't quarrel alone, can you?"

The fox-masked man said.

"Although—that also applies to my daughter, huh... Was that also included in your plan, my enemy?"

"Well... Somewhat."

The fox-masked man—seemed surprised

No, it's not—it's not like I wasn't wishing for that either. Seeing the battle between Aikawa-san and Magokoro, it's not like I didn't wish for her to hold feelings towards the fox-masked man, Humanity's Worst—Saitou Takashi.

However, that wish—probably wouldn't be fulfilled.

I'm sure that was merely a whim.

Like a coincidence.

Only valid once, temporarily, just that.

But,

Even then—a problem of preference.

The reason why the Orange Seed wasn't the end of the world—

"Hey, Mr. Fox."

I—decided to ask one more time.

"Why didn't you bet on Aikawa-san...but on Magokoro?"

"..."

"Although I said some things earlier—from the start... Perhaps since last month, no, even before that—did you perceive that the complete Magokoro wouldn't be able to beat the incomplete Aikawa Jun?"

"In my roots, I still believed Magokoro would win. If I had bet on my daughter."

"...Eh?"

"From the start, I'm an existence who can't be allied with my daughter. Even now—even ten years ago. It has always been that way—always, that girl was more

interesting as an enemy."

Now, the fox-masked man cut in as if signifying this story had ended.

"Then—shall we end it?"

"..."

"Don't worry about those two—in reality, I had contacted Emoto and Konomi from the start. They're probably waiting by the entrance gate, so give them a call and they'll surely make it in time. After all, these two's regenerative power is off the charts."

Step, step, step.

The fox-masked man approached me.

"Surely after all this—you won't end it like a buffoon, saying 'I won't kill you, after all I can't kill people. I'd prefer getting killed to becoming a murderer,' right, my enemy?"

"...Do you want to die?"

"Surely not."

The fox-masked man answered on the spot.

He answered the same question in the same way.

"I still haven't seen—the end of the world."

"Don't you think that now, this moment, is the end of the world—and the end of the Story?"

"Not quite."

The fox-masked man said.

"It's nothing on that level."

"..."

"It's nothing like that. I'm still not satisfied at all."

He laughed as if making fun of me from the bottom of his heart.

"As if it'd end this way."

I—

Swiftly took out the Jericho inserted in the back of my jeans—

While feeling all of its weight in my palm. Feeling the weight of this gun—filled to the brim with bullets.

I pointed the barrel towards Saitou Takashi.

"With that distance—it's a bit uneasy."

The fox-masked man said, as if he didn't feel any fear.

"Come closer."

"..."

I took a step towards the fox-masked man.

"More. ...Right there. That position is just right."

The barrel of the jericho was—

Pointing just in front of the fox-masked man's nose.

Automatic.

No need to raise the hammer.

Pushing the trigger—will end it.

Everything will end.

This long fight—will end.

"Close the curtain."

The fox-masked man said.

"Isn't that your right—Nonsense User?"

"...Don't fuck with me."

I said, with the barrel firmly pointed.

No, I couldn't fix it.

I was trembling.

Shivering.

With fear—right, fear.

Up to now—I had been unbelievably scared of him.

"How is this—the Nonsense User's role?"

"..."

"That's—not my job. If—if you're ready to throw away your stupid ambition of ending the world... I don't mind breaking my promise with you."

"It's impossible."

The fox-masked man said calmly, as if he wasn't seeing the gun.

"After all this, I can't throw my ambition away. I sacrificed way too many things—to do that. From worthless ones to irreplaceable ones, as if they had the same value, as if they were the same."

"..."

"At this point, even my life wouldn't be sufficient."

"You...in the ten years you spent in the Saitou Clinic, did you not feel anything?"

"I didn't feel anything and I didn't imagine anything. And of course, I didn't think of anything. I was already made this way."

"If you—say you're going to give up on that ambition... I wouldn't mind becoming your friend."

"I refuse."

The fox-masked man said.

"I don't need friends. Not anymore."

"..."

"Go have that kind of soft talk with my daughter."

Saying that—he smiled in the Worst way.

"You go well together, you two."

I can't fool it.

I can't deceive it.

I can't leave it vague.

I can't leave it ambiguous.

I can't leave it unclear.

Now—

I had arrived at the terminal.

"Why? Have you become frightened? That should be fine in its own way. I only wish to create the *Thirteen Stairs* anew and yearn for the end of the world again."

"...!"

"If you want to stop me, you must kill me—or perhaps, do you intend to foil my plans for the rest of your life?"

Once—

When Saitou Takashi gave up on me—

I shouldn't have let him escape.

I shouldn't have recognized his escape.

If the opponent retreats—

I should have pressed further in, without mercy.

I should have thrusted in, using it as an opportunity.

Then, I—

This was the moment to redo it.

Right—

I will save the world.

"...Understood."

I said.

"Please die—Saitou Takashi-san. I will kill you and live on."

"Do as you like."

I'll end—one step ahead.

The fox-masked man said so.

A lot of things rushed into my mind.

A lot of people rushed into my mind.

Every person I had met until then.

Especially in the last few months—I remembered them.

Asano Miiko, Yamiguchi Houko, Ishinagi Moeta, Nanananami Nanami, Hayabusa Koutamaru, Chiga Hikari, Chiga Teruko, Niounomiya Izumu, Ishimaru Kouta, Katanashi Rabumi, Suzunashi Neon, Ikaruga Kazuhito, Sasa Sasaki.

Aikawa Jun.

Omokage Magokoro.

Saitou Takashi.

Kajou Akira, Ichirizuka Konomi, Emoto Sonoki, Utage Kudan, Furuyari Zukin, Tokinomiya Jikoku, Migishita Rurero, Yamiguchi Nureginu, Miotsukushi Misora, Miotsukushi Takami, Noise, Kino Raichi.

And—Kunagisa Tomo.

"Yo—by the way."

The fox-masked man suddenly said.

"Do you really think this is the end?"

"...? What do—you mean?"

"From here on, on the road you're on—people like me will appear one after the other. No matter where you go, no matter what you do. Are you saying you're going to live—while understanding this?"

"..."

"For me, you're the end—but for you, I'm not the end. For you, I'm only the start. In the end—nothing but the end. With the current situation, that's probably your only choice. Then, from here on, you'll be attacked by countless misfortunes and much bad luck. All sorts of heretics and every kind of abnormality will rush your way. Don't think you've erased all foreshadowing, don't think you've encompassed all of the world. The world you know is merely a part of this world. A second and third me will soon appear before you. Even then—do you still want to

live? Even then, do you still want to end it, do you still want to go somewhere?"

"Somewhere—"

"What in the world are you going to do now?"

The fox-masked man—

Saitou Takashi sneered at me, and said.

"Answer. From here on, where are you going?"

Saitou Takashi repeated again, overlapping his question many times.

"Where do you want to go—Nonsense User?"

"I..."

Firmly staring at Saitou Takashi's eyes—

I answered Saitou Takashi.

"I won't go anywhere anymore—"

Then, I pressed the trigger of my own will.

"I'm going home."

LAST ACT - AND THEN AFTER THAT

ME (NARRATOR
PROTAGONIS

I woke up to the sound of a well-behaved knock.

"...Oooh."

...It surprised me.

I thought it was an "everything was a dream" punchline.

I was still in a daze, trying to figure out the small gap between dream and reality, swaying my head left and right. "Waking up," I muttered to myself as if checking.

It looks like I ended up sleeping on the sofa.

Errr...

What was I doing yesterday again...?

I checked my watch.

Half past nine of the morning.

Although it's a time unfit for a working person, since I was self-employed, well, it was early enough to be allowed.

Hmm...

However, who was planning on visiting at such an early hour today—I made a promise to meet up with someone I hadn't seen for a while in the afternoon, but that's why I should have decided to quietly do some desk work in the morning.

As I was thinking, the knock continued.

Although they could be thinking I was absent, they were persistent.

It was well-behaved, yet persistent.

That just means their business is that important, I guess.

Well, it might just be a salesman or something.

"Yes yes! I'm coming now!"

Saying that, I crawled up from the sofa and headed

towards the door. After checking through the fish eye just in case, I unlocked the door and opened it.

There was a highschool girl there.

In a uniform, with a blazer.

A school emblem at her collar.

Straight long hair reaching her hip and an alice band.

School shoes, white socks reaching her ankles.

Her appearance made her look like an honor student. However, the worried look she gave me from the gap in the door gave her a suspicious vibe.

"...This isn't really a place a highschool girl should come to, though."

She didn't say anything, so I started the discussion myself.

I wonder, had she chosen the wrong room? Who could a highschool girl be looking for...Nanananami, maybe? Or perhaps she was Houko-chan's friend? But there was no way I wouldn't know Houko-chan's friends. Then... No, in the first place, today was a weekday. Wasn't half past nine the time when she should be at school? She was wearing her uniform too overtly to just be playing hooky...then, could she be a student that goes to school at nighttime?

"..."

The girl tried to mutter something with a dry, fading voice while looking down.

It seemed she was quite shy.

"Err—do you have some business with me? If it's some sales pitch, then—"

"I-I didn't go to the wrong room."

The girl raised her face with a resolved look, and said.

"And, it's not a sales pitch. Th-this—"

Saying that, the girl took out a card from her uniform's

breast pocket. I received it, thinking to myself ‘What, modern high schoolers are quite stylish to have cards for introduction’—

But I soon learned that wasn't the purpose of the girl's card.

"Heeh...I see."

I ended up looking fixedly at that card. No, well, you could say it was its original use, so it's not really something to be surprised about.

"Then, err—what's your name?"

"M-my name?"

"Yes, name."

"Honna Asahi, I guess?"

"You guess?"

Why did she question her own name?

I slightly turned back towards the inside of the room, then, to the girl—Asahi-chan,

"I'd like to go inside now, but..."She said.

"You see, I woke up early as usual and was doing daily chores, cleaning up the room, so it's pretty messy. Also, there's a loud bunch that wouldn't shut up if I brought a highschool girl inside my room. Do you know of somewhere around here to go?"

"Er... Errrrr."

Asahi-chan went into a panic.

Trembling and flustered.

It seemed like her range of adaptability was extremely narrow.

"...Well, then, if we go east on Nakadachiuri Street, there should be a coffee shop named *Threeday March*. Wait for me there. Tell them I sent you and they'll give you a seat in the back."

"Y-yes."

"Also, if possible, your uniform stands out, so if you could change into something else..."

"Sorry, that I can't..."

"I see."

I nodded.

"My-my gym clothes maybe..."

"That'd stand out even more."

"U-uuugh..."

"Then it's fine. I'll change clothes and catch up to you... Let me see, wait for about 10 minutes. They're a coffee shop, but their black tea is much tastier, so be careful."

I said that, waved my hand to relieve Asahi-chan, and closed the door. Looking through the fish eye, Asahi-chan stood by the door for a while looking bored, but eventually went back through the hallway, got in the elevator and descended to the first floor.

"Now then..."

I locked the door again. The sound of a lock sounded like a rejection, so I preferred not letting my clients hear it. It might've been meaningless, but well, it was my so-called consideration as a pro. I turned back towards the sofa and laid the shirt and half pants I was removing on it, then moved to the cabinet.

I chose one of the files from it and took it out.

The blazer that girl was wearing was exceedingly common, with an orthodox design, so I couldn't specify which school she was from at first glance. However, the story is different for the badge. I could find it by the design, form, and the writing in the middle.

"There, there... Oh. That's a famous school."

Sakuraba High School.

One of Kyoto's many private high level schools. There's also a middle school department on the same grounds. Although they study together, clubs are strictly divided between boy and girl ones. It's like having a boy's school and a girl's school on the same grounds.

Returning the file to the cabinet, I next booted up the laptop on my desk. It wasn't a recent one, so it took some time to start up. In that short while, I went to the other room—my private room, and chose my clothes. I was using my residence as a workplace, but I made sure to differentiate between my private room and my office. Well, though I said that, I slept on the sofa in my office.

Then, I casually looked at the bed, and remembered the reason I slept on the sofa. Aah, right, I couldn't use the bed. So that was why. There must've been something wrong with me for forgetting that... However, I was somewhat angry, so I kicked the leg of the bed.

NaturallY, the bed didn't react.

It was a meaningless action.

Now...I need to change.

An outfit, huh.

It was a kid, so if I went with something too serious, they would freak out... But on the other hand, thinking of her age, going with a look too casual might end up making her even more worried. I can't think of myself playing the role of a reliable person, but I somewhat needed to have that readiness. In the end, I chose a business suit of a plain color and didn't put on a necktie.

Leaving the private room, I headed back to the office.

After lightly arranging my hair and such, I inputted my password on the computer that had already started and

operated it. Sakuraba High School. The badge of a second year. Knowing that much was enough for my research.

"Honna Asahi... From the pronunciation, I think it should be written like that, but..."

However—

As I thought, nothing came up.

There was no student named Honna Asahi at Sakuraba High School.

Just in case, I tried to search with different kanji for "Honna" and "Asahi" but the result was the same. There was no need to search for more combinations. Either her name was a lie, or her being from Sakuraba was a lie... Or perhaps even both. There were three possibilities, but I thought the fake name one was more probable. It wasn't so rare for clients to lie about their names.

Well, it was fine.

I just needed to ask if I ever needed to know.

I still prepared and collected data concerning Sakuraba High School, took my bag, put on my shoes and left the room.

My shoes were sneakers.

I didn't think it'd take that much time, but well, I chose to directly head to my afternoon plan after that. Thinking that, I locked the door.

Took the elevator to the first floor.

Then, I ran into Miiko-san.

"Yo."

"Ah, yeah. Good morning."

"You can't really call this early."

"It seems so."

"What's up? That outfit. Going to work now?"

"Something like that."

I nodded.

"What about you, Miiko-san? Are you absent from work today?"

"No. To be honest, I got fired yesterday."

"...You should stick to just one job soon."

"To think a day where I'd hear that from you would come."

Miiko-san faintly smiled.

"Good grief. If only I had known you'd become someone so proper at that time."

"If you had known, what would happen? I don't think it's too late, even now."

"Hmm."

Miiko-san crossed her arms.

"I'll think about it."

"..."

So you will?

So you will?!

Anyhow, Miiko-san said.

"So I'm thinking of going to Suzunashi's place today. Do you have something you want me to tell her?"

"No, nothing much. Aah, please thank her for me for helping me out with a job last time. If not for Suzunashi-san, I would be dead."

"Got it."

"Ah, right. That reminds me, Miiko-san, you sometimes go to train kendo clubs in highschools, right?"

"Yes. Well, through side connections."

"Do you know of Sakuraba High School?"

"Aah... The kendo club there is strong. It's like they're strong in every domain. They also have been the prefecture's representatives. What about it?"

"No. I just might have to borrow your help for this job. If I ever need to, I'll come to see you, so I'll rely on you then."

"Umu. Make the money fly."

"Of course, it'll bloom."

I got off the elevator and Miiko-san got in.

Then, time to go.

Going out from the building—

I looked up at the six storey building built in the space which was once called the "rundown apartment".

Of course, the area of the site in itself didn't change, so the narrow building looked like a tower... Even after many years passed, I still wasn't used to it. Miiko-san said,

"The new rundown apartment is just a tower apartment."

And made a joke that barely passed for an adult and accepted it without caring much. As for myself, I won't say it was better before, but the rent being a few times higher than before was honestly tough at first.

One apartment per floor.

The area of each one was simply doubled and included a bath, toilet, and kitchen, but its initial raison d'être was being cheap.

At least, it should have been.

Well.

Even then—no one had left.

Everyone said that moving was a pain or something, each with a haphazard reason—and didn't try to move out.

It was probably a glorious mistake for the landlord, but Koutoumaru-san, Nanananami, Houko-chan and Miiko-san—everyone, lived here.

Everyone came back here.

"Four years since then, huh..."

I won't say it makes me emotional though.

"...A home, huh."

I shrugged and said "I'm going," to no one in particular, then went out to Nakadachiuri Street and headed towards the coffee shop *Threeday March*.

I opened the door which had a ringing bell with one hand and greeted the master, who silently showed me to the back of the shop. Asahi-chan was sitting in the appointed seat, looking around the shop nervously, seemingly unable to calm down.

No sign of having touched the black tea laid in front of her.

Was a coffee shop too fancy for a highschool girl...?

I didn't think that was the case though.

She seemed like a girl from a reasonably wealthy family.

"Sorry for the wait, Asahi-chan."

After calling out to her, I sat facing her.

"A-ah, no, that's...I didn't wait."

"I see. That's good. I don't like making people wait much, you see," I said. "So, for starters, I want to ask you, before we get down to business—"

I took out the card Asahi-chan handed me earlier and gently laid it on the table.

"This. Who did you get it from?"

"Ah, err—a friend on the net."

"Hmm."

"I don't know their real name—but their username is Lynx. They said you would know about that."

"...Yeah."

I see. Lynx, huh.

Like that, I can see how highschool girls would come to me. That said, from what I can tell, Lynx hid my identity from Asahi-chan...

Well, that wasn't a problem I should interfere with.

The only problem was the business card.

That was—my business card. However, order made, with only ten existing in the world. Replicating it was, in fact, simple, but there was a hidden characteristic only I could perceive, so I could tell the genuine article from a fake.

Also, there was no real meaning in replicating them.

They're not really useful for normal people.

Simply, when someone showed me this card, no matter who it was, no matter the content of the request—I would have to accept it free of charge, that's all it was.

Well, it was like a service coupon.

"I was fearing what kind of outrageous person Lynx would give this card to—but I'm relieved it's a cute girl like you. Then, well—I'm giving it back to you."

"Eh?"

"The benefit only works once, so you can't use it again—so, when there's someone in need around you, like how Lynx did, you'll present them with this card."

"Eh, errr."

"By the way, it's inadvisable to exchange it for money. There's a mechanism so that I'd know when that happens. If you do it, you'd have to be really sneaky or it's no good. You could say that card is just a proof of trust...so the card in itself doesn't mean much. It's simply for when you want to help out friends in a bind."

"..."

"Therefore, no matter the request you're going to make, there are things I can and cannot do. Ultimately, I'll be the one to judge that."

"Un-understood."

"You don't have to be so tense—I'm not someone so admirable or great. As you can see, I'm just a youngster whose age isn't that different from yours."

"B-but."

Asahi-chan said.

"I heard from Lynx you were a great detective able to resolve any request on the spot."

"Great detective, huh."

The nuance was a bit strange.

Rather than strange, it was nostalgic.

"To be accurate, a contractor."

"..."

"Though a starting one. It's not good to accept that praise entirely. Yes, that's just a personal opinion, and in reality, there are differences between people. Also—what I solve aren't cases but problems."

I ordered a coffee from the master who was washing the counter. I waited for it to arrive, took a sip, and,

"Then, let's get down to business."

I said.

As I said that, Asahi-chan looked like it was really hard for her to talk, but we somewhat got down to *business*. Well, despite what I said, from her perspective, I was just someone introduced to her by a friend on the net, just a suspicious man. So a shy girl like her acting this tense didn't bring down my mood much. In the end, gaining the trust of the client is the hardest part of any case. That, I learned from experience.

Trust.

Trust...is a good word.

"I—have a brother."

"Brother? A big brother?"

Yes, Asahi-chan confirmed.

"My brother goes to the same school, but—err, um—at my school, clubs are separated by genders so we don't meet much."

"Hmm."

So there was no need to research beforehand, I thought.

She might have been thinking she was hiding it, but she basically confessed that the name of the school she commutes to was Sakuraba. Also, there was her uniform and badge... Or perhaps Asahi-chan was so cornered she couldn't even think of that.

"So, what about your brother?"

"My brother—might be a murderer."

Asahi-chan—

Said with a truly suffering expression.

"At the very least...he is suspected to be."

"...That's not very refreshing," I commented on my thoughts and said in a suppressed voice. "What do you mean?"

"Um..."

Then—Asahi-chan fell in silence.

It looked like she hesitated to say it herself.

It couldn't be helped, I thought.

I had to step in a little myself.

"Sakuraba High School."

"Eh?"

"That's your school. Right?"

"Eh...eh?"

"Was I wrong?"

"Eh, no, that's right but—how?"

Asahi-chan looked seriously surprised.

I silently pointed at Asahi-chan's uniform, then her badge. "Ah!" Asahi-chan raised a surprised voice as if she really hadn't noticed.

"If you wanted to hide your identity, you should have changed clothes."

"Ah, b-but—"

"From that I can tell, you're a serious girl without malicious intent. I can tell you're not the type to lie—and that you came to me in secret from your family, especially your brother. You pretended to go to school, but came to my place, right? Or else you wouldn't have had gym clothes. That included, I think I can sufficiently understand that your problem weighs heavily and seriously on your mind. But—"

I said.

"If you can't talk to me honestly, I can't help you."

"..."

"I don't want to become someone unable to save a cute girl like you so—if possible, could you give me more information? I'm still a newbie, you see. I can't do anything with this little information."

"...Y-yes."

Asahi-chan was apologetic. I didn't really intend to pressure her—but I guess it's just that hard to handle girls of that age. Thinking "Good grief, I'm still inexperienced," I continued talking.

"Sakuraba High School, if I remember correctly, six months ago—one student died. I think they jumped from

the roof? Are you talking about that case?"

"Yes... B-but how."

Asahi-chan looked surprised again. That was also merely some data I picked up earlier when researching about Sakuraba High School. So it shouldn't serve as an indicator of my abilities, but well, let's play the part still. There's no need to purposely explain.

Most of it was hacking, also...

Despite being lumps of private info, schools' security systems are often child's play. That's common sense. Be careful, well-behaved kids.

"When explaining about your brother, you explicitly left out the name of the school—so it probably had to do with school. Among the people affiliated with Sakuraba High School in the last three years, the only student with a record of having died was Setose Iroha-san."

"Yes...and why three years?"

"Since a second year like you calls him 'big brother', he must be in third or second year at least. In other words, that's the person your brother was present at this school for."

"Waa—"

Asahi-chan raised her voice in wonder.

It kinda made me bashful.

Also, it felt like I was deceiving her, so I also felt remorse.

In reality, I searched through the last 5 years of Sakuraba High School's records. However, the only serious incident I found was the one from half a year ago. So I prepared beforehand in case of this being related to her request, and—

Bingo.

"But—even then, that was left as just an incident. Are you saying your brother did it?"

"No...the police say it's an incident. Same for the teachers. But—my brother is suspected."

"By who?"

Leaving out the police and the teachers—

The only ones left are the students.

I said that, and Asahi-chan nodded.

Hmm—since Lynx sent her to me, I guess it's not just on the level of a bad rumor. It should be much more concrete and dangerous.

"In short—your brother pushed Setose Iroha from the roof?"

"No, not exactly—"

Asahi-chan said.

"That wasn't an incident, but a suicide."

"Suicide?"

"And—my brother forced her to kill herself. That's—what everyone is saying."

She was squeezing out the words from her mouth.

However, that just showed how tough she was.

She wasn't simply a timid and shy girl.

I nodded.

"I see. It's even more trouble than simply being suspected with murder. He didn't do anything concretely—he didn't push her down physically, so alibis, proofs and showing the impossibility of the crime would be meaningless."

I said.

"But it shouldn't work without a connection. Being suspected like that—is there any ground for it? Between your brother and Setose Iroha-san."

"..."

"Say it."

"I—"

Asahi-chan's gaze lowered to the black tea.

"I was bullied by Setose-san."

"...Heeh."

I couldn't see it.

However, for someone with a shy personality like her, well, I guess it was not weird to be a target. Anyway, even if the bully had a reason, the bullied had none in most cases. That's often not talked about.

"And—immediately after my brother heard about this...Setose-san—jumped off."

"I was the first one to use the words 'jumped off'—but if it was an incident, it should be better described as 'fell off'. There's some misdirection there. From the start, it included an element to deceive people," I said. "Falling from up to down is something we can't avoid due to gravity. That's why people longed for the sky. However—if not for birds and bugs, people surely wouldn't have had the thought of flying through the air—"

"Eh?"

"That wasn't related. I never grew out of my habit of talking to myself. Excuse me for that. However, Asahi-chan, I got the gist of it. Then—there was no direct connection between Setose-san and your brother, right? They were merely related through you."

"Yes."

"They didn't know the other any further—hmm. Well, there was an insurmountable wall between the boy and girl sections. However, I wonder if that's really something to suspect this much?"

"..."

"Especially—because of that insurmountable wall."

"My brother—is a problem child."

Asahi-chan said.

"There was a testimony of someone seeing him crossing that wall—and arguing with Setose-san in the girls' section."

"He's got quite the guts."

He was the role model of a big brother.

Unlike me.

If I had to say, like Izumu-kun?

"It's nothing to be praised about."

Asahi-chan said as if my light remark worsened her mood.

What a serious girl.

Nice.

"But—this and that, was all for my sake."

"..."

"My brother was a problem child...but even then, he is kind to me only. For me—he is a kind brother."

"Having his little sister say that, I'm sure the brother is frowned upon by fortune. That said, it's too precipitous to say he killed Setose-san yet. No matter what."

To create a pause, I lifted up my coffee, drank, and made a noise by putting it back on the plate.

"So, what do you want me to do?"

"...Er, err," Asahi-chan hesitated for some time, then said. "So I want you—to find the true culprit."

"..."

"Certainly... The police didn't find it a problem, but for Setose-san to jump off—fall off, that situation has some problems. I get why someone gets suspected. I get it. So

—"

"If we go with those conditions—"

I said as if stabbing Asahi-chan.

"I might determine your brother to be the true culprit."

Hearing those words, Asahi-chan fell silent.

I continued with another question.

"Asahi-chan—what's your thoughts on it? Do you think your brother is a murderer?"

"...My-my brother—"

Asahi-chan answered.

"My brother is—to be frank, a pain in the ass."

"A pain in the ass?"

"A pain in the ass."

"A pain in the ass..."

"Quite a pain in the ass. Far above a problem child. He creates rules inside his head, and when they don't match with other people, he prioritizes his own over the others. So—he's always a source of trouble for me."

"..."

"In reality, until now—in middle and elementary school, this kind of thing happened. Then, he was the culprit. He was the culprit. That's why—it can't be helped that he's suspected this time. I get the feelings of the people suspecting him."

Asahi-chan raised her gaze.

Looking at my eyes.

As if glaring at me.

"But—my brother would have done it with his own hands."

She said,

"My brother isn't someone to make me feel this way.

He wouldn't have made me feel this vague feeling that could go either way. He doesn't do that. Therefore—"

"..."

"Therefore, I believe in my brother's innocence."

Asahi-chan said.

"I trust in my brother."

"Good words."

I said, as if accepting her.

Trust.

"Then—if you request it as 'Proving your brother's innocence,' I'll accept it. Then that's my business. Essentially, it's just making the students understand it's not your brother's doing, right?"

"Eh...b-but."

Asahi-chan objected.

"But if you don't find the true culprit—"

"There's plenty of ways. This world is full of holes. Rather, that's why, if possible, I'd prefer keeping that method for the end. Even if you find the culprit, it doesn't mean anything if the doubts aren't cleared. Also—personally, I'm not too fond of it. Things like finding the culprit or the bad guy. Isn't that too violent? I'm a born pacifist, you see. That doesn't go well with my nature. I don't solve cases, but problems."

I said.

"Every word is inscribed in my dictionary—

"Let's solve it by talking."

After that, I heard the details of the case from Asahi-chan, then her real name, her brother's name, and about the people involved. From my side, I asked for the minimum, her phone number. Also, since she brought the

card, her fees were for free, but I told her there was still the need to pay for the necessary amount in some way. I then parted ways with the highschool girl client.

The time was noon.

It didn't look like I had the time to return to the apartment.

I had to go directly.

I was wearing a jacket, so it should've been fine.

I thanked the master, left *Threeday March*, raised my arm a bit away and picked up a taxi.

Then straight to Kyoto Station.

The meeting spot was a restaurant with a panoramic view in an international hotel nearby the Kyoto Station.

She was there before me.

"...Yo."

Wearing a suit overall coordinated with red, she was the one who stood out the most the moment I entered the restaurant—Aikawa Jun was looking at me, still at the entrance, and lazily, lightly, as if she had seen me the day prior, waved her hand.

Even though it had been a few months.

How should I put it, she was as usual.

I returned the greeting with "It's been a while," before sitting next to her. We had a sweeping view of Kyoto's streets from there. Apparently Aikawa-san had already ordered for us, since the well-behaved staff brought us drinks without us saying anything.

"Sorry, it seems I've made you wait."

"It's fine. I was also nearly late. I went to search for the philosopher's stone on my way to Kyoto but had a bit of trouble finding it."

"..."

Please don't do that on the side.

As usual—she was classy.

"Then, let's make a toast for whatever."

"Thanks."

Ching, our glasses made a small sound.

After that, we both exchanged information on recent circumstances. Well, our positions were too different even in the same business, but being old acquaintances helped here.

"Hmm. Then, you met a client, huh."

"Though it's a job without reward. I thought I'd pass it off to Jun-san if it turned out to be a hassle, but well, it seems manageable, or at least something I can handle myself."

"Really? Just from hearing the gist, it smells kinda dangerous though."

"...If you say that, it might turn out to be true, so please refrain from saying anything."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Let me see. Despite being open, schools are also insular, so—umm, being too old myself, I was thinking of getting Houko-chan's help. In terms of appearance, Misora-chan or Takami-chan would have been fine, but twins stand out too much. Those two aren't suited for undercover missions. So I guess Houko-chan is the best fit."

"Houko-chan, huh. I haven't seen her in years. How's she doing?"

"Aah, she's smoothly growing from a pretty girl to a pretty woman. It's like she far surpassed my expectations. I don't know if I'll be able to wait three more years—"

"Three more years?"

"Ah, no, nothing."

Self-restraint.

Rather, voluntary restraints.

In the end, she never had been to school until now, but being a seventeen year old girl, putting a uniform on her would fool the common person. Then obtaining the uniform was the problem—but anything can be done about that. If necessary, I could just borrow it from the client.

Houko-chan in a uniform, huh... It was a good occasion, so I should try to make her wear all sorts of stuff. I've seen her in a swimsuit and some others when we went to the beach last time and it was the best, so that's fine, but how about it, maybe it's time to try out maid clothes... No! To construct the perfect plan, the perfect growth of the perfect Houko-chan, I still need to hold on...

"Also, depending on the developments, I might have to borrow Miiko-san's help...jumping off probably counts as a case, so I'll have to probe the police, but that can be done with ex-post-facto approval. It doesn't seem to matter much either."

"You gained some dignity. It honestly pisses me off."

"..."

I honestly pissed her off.

"Even though you were a brat unable to do anything by himself the first time I met you."

"Even now—I can't do anything alone."

I said.

"Without everyone, I can't do anything."

"That's a good thing."

"Is it good?"

"That means everyone is by your side."

"...Well of course," I made the motion of shrugging my shoulders. "Hey, Jun-san. May I—ask one thing?"

"What."

"Um, did you go along with the brat that couldn't do anything on his own for so long—because he resembled your father?"

"Stupid."

Aikawa-san laughed cynically.

"Even if that's true or however it might be—you are you, right? You are you and no one else. You don't look anything alike. You don't look like anyone else. Right?"

"...Well, that's true, but..."

I just asked on a whim.

It didn't have any special meaning.

"How is—Magokoro doing?"

"Ahn?"

"I thought she might have been with you today again."

"Aah...wanted to meet her?"

"Not really, it's fine if she's busy—just, I was convinced she would be with Jun-san."

"She's currently with Kouta."

"With Kouta-san?"

"I'll be unable to handle her alone—like a rebellious phase? I sent her on a journey with Kouta to not only teach her sweetness, but also this world's loneliness."

"You sent her..."

"Hihihi. By the time she comes back, her pronoun will surely have become *Boku-chan*."

"..."

Magokoro... What a poor girl...

Even though it's to teach her about this world's

loneliness, there was no need for Aikawa-san to entrust her to Kouta-san.

"It was also the case for Ichihime. It just seems I'm not suited to raise people... It's not like I abandon them, but Kouta-san wanted to lend a helping hand, so we made a deal."

"I see..."

That explained why I hadn't been contacted by Magokoro recently. Given her athletic abilities, Kouta-san must be putting her to use well... Well, despite her existing stats, she's overwhelmingly lacking in exp points. This might be a good occasion for Magokoro, who's on demon lord level.

"So, what about Jun-san? Did you find the philosopher's stone?"

"Yeah."

"..."

So you did.

"But it's not like that's the end of it. I'm also carrying 5 or 6 jobs, so it's been a serious hassle recently. Thanks to that infamous Impostor-chan, I was able to relax for a time though. This time Impostor-chan did a pretty excellent job. Though it's a shame she tries to kill me every time she finds an opportunity—let me see, the request that should be prioritized the most should be Iria's, I guess."

"From Iria-san?"

"The same one as before. 'Kasugai Kasuga disappeared, so go capture her.'"

"...Did she flee again, Kasugai-san."

"I heard this time she cut trees and made a raft to escape."

"So she's surprisingly an outdoor type..."

"Looks like Iria took an insane liking to Kasugai Kasuga. Jeez, even though before, she had eyes for 'Aikawa-san' only. Makes me a lil jealous."

"I kind of agree... It's not like I'm strangers with Kasugai-san. I'll give you a few places she might be at."

"Helps a lot."

"I'm envious of people like that. It's like they're really free. Well, Kasugai-san must have her own worries though."

"Agreed."

Aikawa-san said.

"Err—speaking of freedom, how is Zerozaki-kun doing?"

"No...the last time I saw him was when we parted ways four years ago."

"Isn't he a friend? At least take contact."

"It's fine, we're fine like that," I said. "When the necessity comes, we'll both meet up again. What, if it's about him, he'll fly right back some day."

"Wouldn't he unexpectedly turn up dead somewhere?"

"It's certainly true he's not fit for society... But, he should be totally okay in his domain. I feel like he's probably living depending on someone out there."

"Yeah, I get that, totally. Using his cute face to get a woman to wipe his ass in his stead looks like Zerozaki-kun's style."

"No, I didn't go that far..."

"Then, if you see him, send a message for me—'If you can't restrain from killing someone, I'll be your opponent then.'"

"...I certainly got it."

A Demonic Killer who doesn't kill.

A Demonic Killer unable to kill.

It's—foolish.

I believed—that this tattoo boy was foolishly living somewhere as a clown.

It was an unwavering conviction.

…

Though I still didn't want to see him.

"Ah, right, right. The sequel of what I told you last time—you know, Sumiyuri Academy's ruins."

"Yes."

"That place became an empty lot."

"Aah, yeah it did. In the end, what will it become? I researched enough to know the Origami Foundation is preparing something, but—that's the limit of my skill, honestly."

"They're creating a school."

"…Coming full circle huh."

"No, it looks like a proper one this time."

Aikawa-san said.

"They'll properly, uprightly raise girls. I thought I'd have to crush them if they built that outrageous thing again, but it looks like I don't have to worry."

"It's probably—to atone for their sins."

"They're not that compassionate a bunch—they're only interested in getting the most benefits in the most efficient way. Leaving that spot free for four or five years was abnormal for them. They just couldn't get the idea. Mm…if they plan anything I'll kick their butt."

"Is that so."

"At that time, lend me a hand."

"Of course, rely on me without restraint, please."

"I also felt that when I learned it became a vacant spot—but having experienced all sorts of suffering and hardships there—it's deeply moving."

I see...

That and that and that and that,

All of it—will be things of the past.

They will be stories from long ago, I thought.

"It's not far back enough to get nostalgic—it's too early to make them good memories."

"It's only been four years, right? It's like yesterday."

"...Jun-san doesn't age at all, huh."

"Yeah. It seems I was made this way. Saiyans spent a long time looking young because they were a fighting tribe, right? Hehehe, that's a lucky surprise."

"..."

I wonder if it's good.

"But Magokoro continues growing at a good pace—how should I put it, she's more dignified, or cool. She looks the part, so I don't want to be side to side with her. I mean, in the first place, she was too much of a kid."

"Now there's no reason for her to—restrain herself."

"That's how it is. Thanks to you."

"Then it's fine."

Then—it's fine.

The current Magokoro—

Will experience many more good things.

I had no grounds for this selfish and illogical delusion, but—Omokage Magokoro living her life to the fullest was proof that this world wasn't just a tragedy.

"Hey, Jun-san."

I said.

"Saitou Takashi is—"

"Um?"

"No...it's something I've...continuously thought about in the last four years—why, at the very end, he chose to be killed by me."

"..."

"No, in the first place...why did he go along with that farce. At that time, I felt I had drawn out an appropriate understanding—but thinking about it anew, I don't get it at all. He didn't have to die, did he?"

"...Didn't have to die, huh."

"If we're talking about the origin, even before that—before that whole farce. Since September of that year, he had made a lot of contact with me—in the midst of it, I didn't think of it as that extreme, but thinking about it now—in the first place. That person...from the start, didn't he have no intent to win the fight against me? That's what I came to think."

"No intent to win?"

"It feels like he purposely came to lose against me..."

"No, that's probably going too far. If Magokoro hadn't escaped, that dad would have pressed in further and surely crushed you."

"Maybe...I'm sure that's the case, but, at least, at that time, the fight was made to leave me the winner. He could have had an easy win—but he went out of his way to play out a close match. A close one, or a borderline one. That's why 'did he want to lose'—'did he want to die.' I end up thinking thoughts like those. But, at that time—when I asked him 'Do you want to die,' he denied it. However—towards the end, no matter how you think about it, Saitou-san was trying to die. If I don't think that way, his actions don't quite make sense."

"I wouldn't think he wanted to die either."

"Eh... But..."

"But, he might have thought that dying was better. Ever since ten years before, when I failed to kill him."

"..."

"Because he was a wraith."

Aikawa-san said.

"Similarly to Kajou Akira—Saitou Takashi was a wraith. In the end, the one who got the best part of the cake among this friendly group of buffoons was Aikawa Junya... Hm. A wraith, and a lost child, huh? If there was someone able to comprehend him, he might have been able to rest in peace. ...But it's not something so simple. Also, if I had to say, all of that was probably that dad's whim."

"Whim..."

"'Well, it wouldn't be bad to get killed by him,' or something—didn't he think that way? As usual, randomly. Both Magokoro and Akira—must have had their own pondering to do."

"...Is that so."

"Thinking about it now—that time, that exact moment—might have been the only chance in this world to kill Humanity's Worst Player."

Aikawa-san said cynically.

"Thinking of it the other way around, that dad waited long enough and was finally able to die—he finally grasped a chance to die."

"That should be about right."

Wanting to die.

Thinking it's better to die.

Feeling—like dying.

"Either way, it's the past. No one can know the truth of things. Neither me nor you, and of course, not that dad either. That time—how should I say it, it was probably good timing."

Good timing.

That was—a remark which hit home.

It might have been better to pass each other.

Even now, I couldn't think that it was the best result.

It's was dubious whether I did everything I could.

However—

"At least—I have no regrets or reflections. That was that. In itself, it was fine as is."

"Ooh. How optimistic."

"At least, I want to admit my efforts of the time. The brat did his best in a way."

"Hmm. I see."

After that, it was just small talk.

I was just a newbie so I had plenty of free time, but as Aikawa-san said she was insanely busy. She couldn't spend much time in private, so the meal ended after one more hour,

"Then, I should go."

With her saying that.

"I'll pay."

"No real need to."

"Just accept it. Your current job is free of charge, right? In the contractor business, your capital is key at the start."

"Right—and that business card served as good advertisement. Well, okay. It was a cute highschool girl, so it's not like my motivation totally died. But, then, I'll let myself be spoiled this time."

"Mh."

Aikawa-san pulled her seat and stood up.

"...Right. This is something I've wanted to ask since pretty long ago, may I now?"

"Eh?"

"It doesn't look like I'll be able to see you for a while. I'm busy and you too, will probably soon be. I wanted to ask whenever I could meet you."

"It's fine with me."

"Four years ago, why—didn't you think of retiring?"

"..."

"That must have been a good quitting point, right? To retire from everything you were involved with. All the foreshadowing had disappeared, every bond had dissolved. Your connection with every little detail, with every abnormality—had been severed."

Aikawa-san continued with a rare serious look and tone, without any hints of being joking.

"In spite of that, you came into my business. After getting through all these harsh events—didn't you learn anything? Even if you're an idiot, you must have understood, no?"

"I'm not really wise."

I immediately answered.

That was—something I had thought about many times.

Many, many times.

When someone would ask—

An answer I could give proudly.

But, in the end.

The one to ask first was Aikawa-san.

"Also, I'm not good at remembering. If I didn't continue, I would have forgotten the past."

"..."

"Though I don't want to remember that period... I mustn't forget—that's all."

"...I see. Really, you're unequalled, I swear."

Aikawa-san smiled as if having fun.

That was—an expression I couldn't see often.

"But wouldn't it be buried under the sea of memories? In those four years—a lot must've happened, right?"

"A lot happened. But, well, even then, memorable events fade with time," I said. "With the logic of 'The present exists because the past existed,'—forgetting that period would be denying the present, right? For some reason, it's unpleasant."

"Unpleasant, huh?"

"If even someone like me can become someone's replacement—that shouldn't be a bad thing."

"Someone's replacement?"

Aikawa-san shrugged her shoulders.

"Idiot. I swear, are you still saying that? You can only say that at the start. In reality, being a contractor isn't anything like becoming someone's replacement."

"...Then, for Jun-san, what exactly is a contractor?"

"Isn't that obvious? It's for someone's sake."

Aikawa-san said nonchalantly.

"For the sake of someone I love, I can become as strong as needed—I can do anything. That's definitely not something bad, right?"

"...Right."

I—

I nodded.

"I think so too."

For someone's—sake.

For someone's sake.

"I want to do something—for someone's sake."

"You're really stupid."

Aikawa-san grinned.

"Despite saying you don't want to forget, haven't you already forgotten? You were probably told that by Hikari or Teruko, but you've been doing that all this time normally, haven't you?"

"...Then it might really be my vocation."

"I bet."

Then, Aikawa-san said,

"Well then, I have good news for you."

Her expression turned back to being mean.

As if—

As if she only came here today to tell me this.

"My dad is again—planning on doing something."

I—

After hearing that, firmly nodded.

"I don't mind. Then I'll just have to hinder him again."

Then, trying to be as cool as possible, I said.

"Because I decided I'd follow him all my life."

Parting with Aikawa-san, on the way back I didn't use a taxi or the bus, but just walked leisurely along Karasuma Street, thinking back about every little thing I talked about with Aikawa-san.

Various things.

Things that wouldn't fade.

After that, I quit university.

In the end, quitting halfway through again.

The only thing I earned with the ER Program was *qualification* equal to having finished high school. Would

that make elementary school my last academic background? No, it probably wouldn't, but I was somewhat scared to check that aspect.

Retiring halfway through—

I wandered for a while, but in the end, I imitated Aikawa-san and decided to become a contractor. I already told the reasoning to Aikawa-san earlier.

I didn't want to deny—

Everyone I had been involved with up to then.

Though it's not like I wanted to affirm them...

But, well.

Apart from that—I simply admired her.

Though that's something I would never confess to Aikawa-san, no matter how much I grew—'I want to become like Aikawa Jun,' that was my thought process.

Like Aikawa Jun did, I want to get involved with people.

That was my wish.

That's why... It's like, rather than liking Aikawa-san, I've always wanted to become like her.

Even now.

And in the future too.

"Well, that kind of thing is..."

Miiko-san was 26 and still a freeter. Her salary was raised as much as the space of the apartment, so the antiques were constantly flowing in. At this point, she should start a museum or something.

As Nureginu-san predicted, Houko-chan lost all the talent as an assassin that had been drilled into her head. However, her sharpness didn't change, so she was growing, and even now helping me in all sorts of ways in my jobs. Of course, without a way to make money, she couldn't pay for the higher rent, so I'm paying for half of

it. I'll get back what she owes me someday... No matter what happens, I'll definitely get back what she owes me, so for now it was natural for both of us.

Koutoumaru-san trained his muscles as usual. Recently, it looks like he's been making a truce with Miiko-san. Maybe he awakened to his oriental preferences. I still end up jealous when seeing Miiko-san getting along well with other men, so it was a source of trouble for me.

Nanananami quit the university she went to at the same time as me, and became a mangaka. She's drawing in a minor shounen magazine, getting some fame with touches somewhat comprehensible for the average reader and stories somewhat incomprehensible for the average reader. I sometimes help her. It seems recently she's been troubled over human relationships with her editor. Thinking that even this woman had a delicate part warmed my heart.

"...Oops. It was close."

I realized I walked along the Kyoto Imperial Garden before I noticed, l looked around. It was right in front of Nakadachiuri.

Umu.

I crossed the traffic light and this time walked while looking sideways at the town of Kyoto. I realized I haven't had the chance to walk that way often recently.

I'd stayed in contact with Emoto-san and Rurero-san ever since... Actually, I'd been close to them, however, unlike four years ago, unlike that time where I would be wrapped in bandages everyday, I stopped repeating my short trips to the hospital.

Maybe I became more cautious.

Or perhaps I became even more cowardly.

Whether that was growth or not wasn't something for me to judge...but regardless, it was a good thing I didn't get injured now.

Bad luck and misfortune continued around me without pause, all a succession of troubles and accidents—and as Aikawa-san said, enough things happened, enough to make the events from four years ago hazy, but...

I no longer wished for quiet time.

—But.

Even then, unlike before, not many people died.

There were plenty of times where people got sad.

There were plenty of times where people got hurt.

Doing all of those jobs might have been a source of why I became optimistic, but I don't think that was all of it.

"Four years since then—"

Four years.

"And since then—ten years."

Ten years.

How young I was, I thought.

Although I was probably still young.

Even looking back at the last 4 years, I was still only failing and getting things wrong—but even then, I felt like I'd progressed compared to that time.

The failures were proof of my growth.

The pain of wounds fade away someday.

Well, at any rate—

The world was going strong today again.

"Now...I've become somewhat busy so—"

Let's tell—a little nonsense.

Arriving at Senbon Street, I headed towards the

apartment.

I called back the elevator that had stopped at the highest floor.

For starters, I decided to resolve things in order, starting with Asahi-chan's case. Five in the evening. A time when I didn't need at all to wait for the next day to start anything.

I thought of the steps I would take in the elevator and arrived at the sixth floor with my office.

In front of the door, one woman was standing.

Jet black hair. A docile, long skirt, a high neck shirt, and a cardigan. Court shoes with thin soles, a small handbag hanging in front of her legs.

Only her left eye was—barely blue.

"Ah. Welcome back, Ii-chan."

"Mm. I'm home."

She was faintly smiling.

I answered with the best smile I could muster.

The happiness I was searching for was so far, but—

We were able to attain happiness.

While losing many things,

We earned something irreplaceable.

And so, this ambiguous and mechanical scrawling of unanswered questions, accompanied by a certainty so under-cooked it’s practically unnatural, comes to its almost predictably anticlimactic end, like a vague, crimson fairy tale.

Kunagisa was at my side.

And like that, we walked alongside one another.

"After Festival" is the END.
"Juvenile Talk" is HAPPY END.
Congratulations!!

Afterword

The author of this text is a narrow-minded, twisted guy, to the point normal people would get creeped out at, so he basically hates happy endings and thinks the denouement should be indecisive and that, at the end of the story, bad guys shouldn't especially turn into good guys or that misfortunate people should become happy. Hearing that doesn't satisfy me. Bad guys don't have a change of heart, misfortunate people stay misfortunate—my belief behind writing is that people don't change, so my philosophy and doctrine is to find how they should live under those conditions. When writing the Zaregoto Series, I swore to myself that no matter how the Story turned out, that no matter how the characters grew, there would be no fundamental change. Not everything went as planned, but I think I was at least able to achieve that. There was no case of something being complemented by something else, and most cases were too late to do anything about. Having merely understood, there was attachment to every other choice of any decision—more than anything, there is no end anywhere. Even now, it's like everything is making preparations—just waiting to start. Even if you say everything is okay as long as it ends well, no one can be sure of where that end is, and any happy end of every novel might be from a printing error where 'That was a lie and in fact, everyone died,' was just missing from the end of the text—but, therefore, they live to the fullest in order to not hold regrets even if they were to die tomorrow. But still, with that way of thinking, I'm still not completely satisfied. What remained in your heart?

Needless to say, this book, *Uprooted Radical (Part Three): The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User*, is the sequel to *Uprooted Radical (Part One): The Thirteen Stairs* and *Uprooted Radical (Part Two): Overkill Red vs. The Orange Seed*, but also the conclusive last issue to the Zaregoto Series, comprised of *Decapitation Cycle : The Blue Savant and the Nonsense User*, *Strangulation Romanticist : Hitoshiki Zerozaki, No Longer Human*, *Hanging High School : The Nonsense User's Disciple*, *Psychological (Part One) : Gaisuke Utsirugi's Nonsense Killer*, *Psychological (Part Two) : Sour Little Song*, *Cannibal Magical : Niounomiya Siblings, Masters of Carnage*. For an author, anything they created is simultaneously their greatest masterpiece and their greatest failure. In other words, they continue to write incomplete works that won't ever get completed, but, if you could interpret the 2 million nonsensical words I worked hard to produce as something more or less than a simple number, I would be overjoyed beyond my hopes.

Publishing this work was so full of hardships I wanted to ask anyone lying around to just kill me. Many things happened, but thanks to the hard work of my editor in-charge Oota-san, and illustrator in-charge Take-san, we were somewhat able to achieve it. However, this time, more than anyone, one person stuck through until the very end, that being the reader, you. I want to dedicate to you my modest words of gratitude. Thank you very much for reading with affection.

Nisio Isin

Notes

[←1]

Here she uses the pronoun "boku" instead of her usual "boku-sama-chan."

[←2]

Listing the second kanji in the names, with the first ones being the archaic form of numbers 1 to 9.

[←3]

A martial arts concept where one redirects their opponent's power and uses it to their advantage.

[←4]

A play on the expression "Wives and tatami are better when they're new."